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# ***Wrestling Observer Newsletter***

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*ICHI, NI, SAN, DA!*

If you look at a listing of the largest crowds and biggest gates in the history of pro wrestling, one company dominates the list. While an argument can be made that the No. 1 promotion in the world today is the World Wrestling Federation, because of its stronger international presence, no argument can be made that within its home country, no promotion right now is any hotter or has the kind of mainstream appeal and popularity as New Japan Pro Wrestling.

The evidence of the latter was clear throughout Tokyo this past week. Can you imagine an equivalent of this at any point in either the United States, Mexico or Europe? During the closing days of the Olympics and with baseball season in full swing, that the cover story with four large color photos for three straight days in several of the daily sports pages revolved around the G-1 Climax and J Crown tournaments. By the time the finals rolled around on 8/6, New Japan had drawn approximately 55,000 fans and probably well in excess of \$3 million in ticket sales and who can even estimate how much in concessions to the same building over five days. Standing room tickets for the championship night at Sumo Hall were being scalped for \$100 to \$200. Not that this is anything new. The G-1 tournament, which debuted at Sumo Hall in 1991, has annually done figures in this range, and has gotten so popular that there are even betting pools, similar to the NCAA basketball tournament in the United States, with insiders and outsiders trying to figure out who is going to beat who with what move and how much time the matches will last.

From having three sellouts at the Tokyo Dome over the past year, to selling out four of five nights this past week at Sumo Hall, to building for its long-term future better than any promotion in the world, there are many who would say New Japan in many ways is the closest thing to a model of what a national wrestling promotion should be.

The name that immediately comes to mind when the promotion is mentioned, is its founder, all-time legend and spiritual leader, Antonio Inoki. There is no wrestler of the modern era, and few if any ever, who have had more enduring impact on pro wrestling in their part of the world. And there are none, in history, who have been able to maintain his level of popularity for more than three decades.

This didn't exactly happen overnight. In fact, to adequately explain how New Japan got to where it is, one needs to go back 36 years.

Rikidozan was the lord of Japanese wrestling, a mythical national hero who has been described as the Babe Ruth of his country. Like the Babe, he actually grew bigger in death than he was in life, not that he wasn't plenty big in life. In his case he was stabbed to death in a night club incident that was believed to have been gangland related at the age of 36. A few years before his death, Rikidozan heard about a Japanese-born high school track star named Antonio Inoki. Inoki had been living with his family during his teenage years in Brazil. Perhaps the biggest irony of all is that Rikidozan also recruited a baseball pitcher named Shohei Baba at about the same time. The two were trained together, actually debuted on the same card on September 30, 1960, and the rivalry between the two, at times peaceful, at other times exceedingly bitter, would end up dominating and at times being the focal point of wrestling in their country for more than three decades.

At first, he was known as Kanji Inoki, to hide the fact he was half-Brazilian during a time where it was believed that fact would be detrimental to his getting over. After the death of Rikidozan three years later, which led to the public finding out about gangster involvement and control of the pro wrestling world, the business hit the first of several historical lulls. At around the same time, both Baba and Inoki were sent to the United States for seasoning by Rikidozan, with the plan, which has remained traditional in Japan, for sending young

wrestlers abroad and then bringing them back as stars. Baba was a headliner throughout the United States in major cities and a big money draw as a heel because of his size, which was rare for wrestlers of that era. Inoki was a prelim wrestler generally working smaller territories. Baba returned as a star and JWA was built around him in its recovery period, with grudge matches against the top Americans of the day, such as Dick the Bruiser, Killer Kowalski, Bruno Sammartino, Johnny Valentine and Fritz Von Erich. When Inoki returned, he had to settle for the No. 3 babyface spot, also behind Toyonobori.

During this period, Inoki met Hisashi Shinma starting a relationship that would last three decades that was every bit as historically significant as the Vince McMahon Jr./Hulk Hogan relationship. Frustrated with his position in the Japanese Wrestling Association (JWA), at the time the national monopoly wrestling company, he did what at the time was unthinkable. Inoki, Toyonobori, Hiro Matsuda, a wrestler right out of the recent Olympic games in Tokyo named Masa Saito, along with Shinma, who bankrolled much of the operation, formed the original Tokyo Pro Wrestling company. That lasted about one year, with Inoki placed in the top position. It was long enough as the top star that when the group folded and Inoki was brought back into the JWA, he was now in the No. 2 position, behind only Baba. Although he was positioned behind Baba in the pecking order in that Baba held the International title and feuded with the top Americans, in many ways the two were considered equals since Inoki was considered the most skillful and technical of the Japanese wrestlers, a reputation enhanced with two legendary 60:00 draws in late 1969 against Dory Funk Jr. for the National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight title.

By 1971, the situation changed once again. Inoki and Baba, working together at this time attempted a coup, attempting to rally all the boys together to take the promotion over from President Junzo Hasegawa (who had wrestled in the Rikidozan days as Yoshinosato). This coup initially failed, and in the fallout, Baba, the promotion's top star, was protected, and Inoki was the one who took the heat, and was fired in December of 1971. Inoki and Shinma immediately set up forming their own company, known as New Japan Pro Wrestling, with its first show on March 6, 1972. Without recognition of the National Wrestling Alliance, which basically controlled most of wrestling in those days including the World Wide Wrestling Federation, which was then part of the NWA, and the AWA supplying its talent to a smaller group in Japan called International Wrestling Enterprises that had formed a few years earlier, Inoki and Shinma were largely froze out of the top foreign talent.

The two were able to lure scientific master Karl Gotch, a renegade of sorts who was legendary in Japan, but had a reputation for being kicked out of territory after territory in the United States largely because he was so good a legitimate wrestler, so uncooperative with promoters and not really much of a drawing card for the promoters to put up with the headaches and inability to control him. Gotch was both a star wrestler and a trainer for JWA in the early 60s and one of Inoki's original wrestling teachers and recognized by the Japanese press and hardcore fans as one of the sports grand masters along with Lou Thesz. New Japan brought Gotch in and recognized him as the "real" world heavyweight champion. What gave the group instant credibility was on its first show, Gotch wrestled and surprised everyone by pinning Inoki in the main event, a match that is still remembered to this day. The storyline was that Inoki, who had been out of action several months after being fired and busy putting together a new company, wasn't in top shape, while Gotch, without those pressures, was. It was the beginning of the concept of athletic credibility which in one of the many early concepts that became the backbone of the company and are largely responsible for much of today's success. It set the stage for the first New Japan card to draw 10,000 fans, the Inoki-Gotch rematch on October 4, 1972, where Inoki scored his big win and "finally" won his elusive first world title.

Over the next year, Baba wound up quitting JWP to form All Japan Pro Wrestling, which opened in late 1972 and immediately because of Baba's pull, gained recognition from the NWA, which sealed the fate of JWA, which was forced to fold by April of 1973.

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New Japan opened one of the biggest series' in its history on 8/2 at Sumo Hall, opening both the G-1 and J Crown tournaments. The G-1 is the traditional top singles tournament in the promotion, kind of a "King of the Ring" but with all the top stars and on a much larger basis. The J Crown was a first, a tournament to unify eight different titles from around the world and create the supreme World junior heavyweight champion.

The J Crown opened with title vs. title unification matches on the first two days, followed with two semifinals which would be two belts vs. two belts, and finished with the "biggest junior heavyweight match in history," in which eight different titles would be at stake. The titles ranged from those with international importance (IWGP junior heavyweight), longstanding national tradition (NWA welterweight which dates back to the 30s and the days of El Santo in Mexico), recent creations (WAR International junior heavyweight), ones with some history (WWF light heavyweight), replicas of some with major history which mean nothing today (NWA junior heavyweight) to more minor ones (Great Britain junior heavyweight, WWA junior light heavyweight and UWA light heavyweight--the latter belt which isn't even recognized by UWA but has become a secondary New Japan jr. title). But the biggest story of the J Crown was hardly the major promotion match which created the most decorated champion of all-time in any weight class.

The day before G-1 opened, Riki Choshu, the booker, most famous full-time performer and the guy who basically runs the show in New Japan, announced that it would be his final G-1 tournament. The story was played up big in most of the sports papers and the gimmick worked to perfection, as the reaction to Choshu on the first night, and for that matter, for the rest of the week, had the kind of intensity that you'll rarely see in any sport. He was Jimmy Connors in his last U.S. Open, the overwhelming sentimental favorite. To make matters more dramatic, his opening match, the main event on the first night, was against Shinya Hashimoto, current IWGP heavyweight champion and New Japan's current top star.

Sumo Hall, which holds 11,066, was packed, scaled from 10,000 yen (about \$93) down to 4,000 yen (\$37). There were a few empty seats, crowd announced at 11,000--but no tickets were available at the box office. The fans were electric before the show even started. You know a promotion is over when the theme song from its television show plays, and the fans clap to it in unison.

1. Yuji Nagata beat Tatsuhiro Takaiwa with a cross armbreaker submission after an exploder suplex (a combination of a captured suplex and a uranage) in 12:20. These two are both very good wrestlers who will be major stars in the future. Nagata is the best of the company's young workers and will probably at some point years down the line grow to the Muto, Chono, Hashimoto level. A real good opener. \*\*\*1/4

As would become the pattern for the week, the match started on the mat with real stiff blows back-and-forth. The younger wrestlers are generally more innovative, and work a lot of UFC spots into their match, before trading near falls and getting submissions with the other struggling to get to the ropes. Right now the hot moves in Japan mainly stem from the famous Keiji Muto vs. Nobuhiko Takada last October at the Tokyo Dome--the leg whip, or Dragon screw as it's known in Japan, the cross armbreaker which actually dates back to a famous Inoki vs. Tiger Jeet Singh match in the 70s but is back in vogue due to the Gracies (on television when it's used, the announcers will usually scream about the Gracies to get it over) and of all things, a pro wrestling move that meant little in Japan for years, but dates back to the days of Buddy Rogers, the figure four leglock, since Muto made Takada submit to it in one of the biggest matches in pro wrestling history. But any submission that has worked in big matches of late,

whether it be the STF, the Power Strangle, the crooked head scissors (known as V-4 armlock now), drew incredible heat nearly every time it was applied. New Japan style is almost elementary in its simplicity. The punches, chops, kicks and clotheslines are stiff and well executed. Guys do what they can do that looks good, and if they can't do a move that looks right, they simply don't do it. The key to the style right now is psychology, which is funny because Japanese wrestlers are generally thought by Americans to not know psychology, when in fact as a group nowadays they are further ahead psychologically than even the smartest workers in the United States. Throughout the week, fans, and these are largely very well read, exceedingly informed fans who watch closely, didn't recognize that Riki Choshu hardly did a thing all week but a few signature moves, take a pounding, and show tremendous fire in his comebacks adding to the natural drama of the storyline he created that got over. They didn't recognize that Masahiro Chono, the most charismatic heel in the world right now, starts every match boring and has to pick his spots perfectly to build a match because he's never been the same athletically since suffering a severe neck injury in 1992. Matches are for the most part very similar, but even after five days in the same building, the crowd reactions rarely were less than spectacular for the finishes. They start slow with the crowd quiet. Usually at the point it starts to get boring (and sometimes after that point), they big things up with the submissions and near falls, building to the ultimate crescendo which comes with a clean win in the middle. In five days, every match had a clean finish, the biggest pops were for the submission finishes, and there was nothing even remotely close to a run-in or a referee bump to prime the crowd that the finish was coming. If there is a key in all this, it's that every fan in the building knows the match will end with one of the big moves, but they don't know which one, so everyone that escapes the move gets a pop. And that everyone, from the opening match guy to the biggest star in the company, is susceptible when caught in or by one of the other guys' signature (because most have a few) moves. How many times can you recall seeing the top babyface in the promotion lose three consecutive singles matches clean in the middle without gimmicks, outside interference or any real excuse, and be over more at the end of the week than he was at the beginning? How many top babyfaces in a promotion would even take the risk to find out? Yet, like many other things, this is a story that builds from something that was successful in the past.

2. Takashi Iizuka (Takayuki Iizuka) & Tadao Yasuda & Osamu Nishimura beat Michiyoshi Ohara & Akira Nogami & Tatsutoshi Goto in 16:54 when Iizuka pinned Nogami after a blizzard suplex. Iizuka and Nogami are long-time tag partners and should be heated rivals since Nogami turned heel joining the Heisei Ishingun group (kind of a Japanese version of the Dungeon of Doom), but this feud is about as over as Big Bubba vs. John Tenta. Nogami has added reddish hair to his look. Iizuka is a talented wrestler lost in the shuffle and appears to wrestle at that level. Yasuda is a huge (6-6, 310) ex-sumo who is kind of clumsy and looks out of place with all the smaller stud wrestlers in this group, but has actually become an underneath cult figure who gets huge pops for moves like giant swings, bodyblocks into the corner and in particular, for his double-arm suplex. Nishimura is the one young wrestler in the company that just doesn't have it. His moves are fine, but he's lacking badly in charisma and has no facial expressions. Goto is basically an old slug who moves slow, but his offense is at least stiff and he can get by a bit with a tough-man gimmick. This match got wild when the heels did a stuff piledriver on Nishimura. From that point on the match was excellent with great heat. The two sides went back and forth with near falls, kicks outs and saves before the finish. \*\*\*1/2

3. In the first J Crown match, Great Sasuke--real name Masanori Murakawa (IWGP jr. heavyweight) defeated Masayoshi Motegi (NWA jr. heavyweight) to unify the two belts in 11:50. Sasuke got the first huge pop on the show coming out. Motegi, who wasn't over, hit a plancha at the bell and quickly worked on Sasuke's bad knee early, wrapping it around the post and using a chair on it to get people into it from the start. After a uranage, he used a half crab and then an STF to continue to damage it. Sasuke made a comeback doing an incredible tope con hilo (in this case a majestic dive way over the top rope doing a mid-air flip). The two traded big moves back and forth until Motegi tried a gut wrench off the top rope but Sasuke landed on top, and then quickly hit a german suplex and a tiger suplex for the pin. \*\*\*3/4

4. Ultimo Dragon--real name Yoshihiro Asai (WAR International jr. heavyweight) defeated Jushin Liger--real name Keiichi Yamada (British jr. heavyweight) to unify the belts at 2:38. Dragon dropkicked Liger out of the ring and immediately hit a tope, then climbed to the top rope and did a flip plancha to the floor. Liger in the ring made a comeback with a throw out german suplex and some koppo kicks. They went right to the finish, with Dragon going for La Magistral (another over move since it's been used as a finish in numerous jr. matches this year) for a near fall, going for a second but Liger blocked and reversed it (the finish of their previous match at the J Cup in December), but Dragon reversed the reversal into a cradle of his own for the pin. The crowd went nuts and was buzzing for about two minutes after the finish. At the time this looked like great booking even though one would expect a 20:00 classic with these two. It was exactly what the crowd wasn't expecting and most important, it educated them to the idea that for the rest of the week, the finish could come at any time. However, as the week went on, it became apparent the true reason for this finish was quite a bit more serious. \*\*\*

5. Dan Severn pinned Yoshiaki Fujiwara in 10:30. This match was worked to look like a total shoot, although it obviously wasn't. Severn didn't wear either his NWA or UFC belts to the ring nor was he announced as either the NWA or UFC champion. The two traded getting each other into the mount, but since both were "sportsmen," neither punched from the top. This was Fujiwara's best performance in years as he carried Severn and pulled out some really unique submissions out of nowhere which had people thinking Severn would lose and Severn sold them great. The fans seemed like they wanted to pop for Severn, but he never showed any fire and it was really Fujiwara who they reacted to. The finish saw Severn use four straight firemans carries into suplexes with Fujiwara kicking out each time and getting weaker each time. After the fourth one, Fujiwara was basically out, and after the fifth one, he was pinned. Finish was flat because fans expected to see Severn win with a submission, but overall it was a very good match. \*\*\*1/4

6. In the first G-1 match in the B Block, Masahiro Chono (2 points) beat Satoshi Kojima (0) in 13:46 with the STF. A shockingly great match with excellent heat. Kojima is limited when it comes to moves, but has tremendous fire and charisma. The people seem to really like him, but they also recognize he's not the calibre of the top guys yet and accept him at his level. The ring broke near the finish when Chono went for a sunset flip off the top rope which ended up being pretty well screwed up. \*\*\*\*

7. In the A block, Kensuke Sasaki (2) beat Hiroyoshi Tenzan (0) (Hiroyoshi Yamamoto) in 15:03 with the reverse ipponzei (judo hiplock), Northern Lights bomb and Power strangle submission. Very stiff. Both got huge reactions coming out. This probably would have been an excellent match but a few minutes in, Sasaki slapped Tenzan in the ear so hard that Tenzan was knocked silly. Sasaki had to hold a chinlock for several minutes before Tenzan recovered enough to continue the match. When Tenzan finally got it back, they picked things up with both doing all the hot moves to each other. \*\*\*1/2

8. In the B block, Kazuo Yamazaki (2) beat Keiji Muto (0) in 13:39. Excellent match. Muto dominated the first half on the mat but fans believe in every slight move Yamazaki does because of his UWFI background. The story of the match was that Muto kept going for the Dragon screw and Yamazaki kept fighting his way out. Finally Muto got two straight Dragon screws, hit the moonsault and put the figure four on in the middle, but Yamazaki made the ropes. Muto did another Dragon screw, and went for the figure four, but Yamazaki pulled a counter into a cross armbreaker and got the submission in a major upset. The place went nuts for the upset, with people throwing the cardboard cartons drinks come in all over the building (traditionally at Sumo Hall for sumo matches, fans buy pillows so it on since most of the lower level seats don't have chairs they are boxes where four people sit on the floor and shoes aren't allowed in the boxes--however after the 1991 G-1 after two classics with Muto vs. Vader and Muto vs. Chono, fans threw so many pillows that pillows were banned from the building, so the in thing for a match of the year is to throw the cardboard cartons). \*\*\*\*

9. In the A block, Riki Choshu (Mitsuo Yoshida) (2) pinned Shinya Hashimoto (0) in 17:14. Very simple but incredibly heated and one of the best matches from a psychology standpoint I've ever seen. The closest thing to compare this match to would be the Michaels-Diesel match from Omaha earlier this year in that the drama and heat was incredible. This match was tons more stiff and the emotion was better since Choshu and Hashimoto are more over than Michaels and Diesel were on the respective nights, however Michaels is incredible and I'd rate the two matches as basically equal as the best non-All Japan heavyweight matches of the year. Basically Hashimoto just kicked the crap out of Choshu. He got several near falls and near submissions and beat the hell out of him more outside the ring. After a whip into the guard rail, Hashimoto went for a spin kick but Choshu blocked it and Hashimoto hit the floor, selling his right knee. Choshu then began working on the knee, which was the story of the tournament. Choshu got in the ring and when Hashimoto struggled to the apron, he ran across the ring for a clothesline, but shocked everyone by basically taking out Hashimoto's knee big-time. When Hashimoto finally got in, he was hit with two lariats on the basically immobile Hashimoto who refused to go down but couldn't move and was a sitting duck. As Choshu went for a third, Hashimoto blocked it and gave him a stiff chop. Hashimoto's comeback was quickly cut off, and Choshu went for a superplex. This is the one bad spot which actually happened three times during the week, as ref Massao "Tiger" Hattori, who always refs Choshu's matches, puts his hand on Choshu's butt to balance him when he does the superplex off the top which really looks cheesy. Choshu then delivered five lariats on Hashimoto, who again refused to go down but couldn't move out of the way, before he finally collapsed and was pinned. There were no cartons left to throw because of the previous match but the place went crazy for the upset, setting the tone for the week. \*\*\*\*1/2

From a wrestling standpoint, this was the best show I've seen this year. The WCW Great American Bash PPV may have been a better show because of angles, but for consistent calibre of wrestling, this rates among the best. Backstage at the show were Marco Ruas, Pedro Otavio and Hugo Duarte, three top Brazilian Vale Tudo fighters who were in town for a Vale Tudo show two days later. They challenged New Japan's wrestlers to matches. Inoki, on behalf of the promotion, accepted the challenge. Nobody was quite sure if it was an angle or not, which is the kind of angle Inoki has specialized in during his career.

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New Japan struggled early, but scored a big coup when Seiji Sakaguchi, who became the No. 2 star in JWA behind Baba after Inoki was kicked out, joined the group instead of Baba's All Japan as JWA was falling apart. Inoki and Sakaguchi formed the main event tag team on most shows, positions they basically maintained throughout the decade. With most of the NWA (and most WWWF, since it was part of the NWA at the time) wrestlers unavailable, New Japan attempted to gain equal credibility to All Japan as the top international group by buying the National Wrestling Federation, Pedro Martinez' promotion out of Buffalo and Cleveland. The other American deal they made was with the Mike LeBelle promotion in Southern California, an NWA member which played a major part in early Japanese wrestling history since people like Rikidozan, Kintaro Oki and Giant Baba were all headliners. LeBelle became the main booker for foreign talent into the group, which didn't give them the kind of a talent pool as All Japan, but at least gave them access to the wrestlers that worked the Los Angeles territory.

Since the Gotch title was created from cloth, Inoki wanted to win a real American world title. The NWF's champion, Johnny Powers, became one of New Japan's biggest stars of the 70s after dropping the title to Inoki on December 10, 1973. However, the NWF quickly fell apart in its home area since Inoki couldn't draw in those cities, so his dream of being a superstar in the United States again remained elusive, even while wearing a world title belt. Inoki created Tiger Jeet Singh as his first big rival, and on October 14, 1973, the group broke its attendance record by drawing 12,000 fans as Inoki & Sakaguchi beat Thesz & Gotch in 47:00.

Perhaps New Japan's most successful concept ever is those rare occasions where they are able to convince the general public that a specific match is so important, with stakes so high, it was going to be real in that the outcome wouldn't be predetermined. The famous recent example was the company's most successful show ever with Muto vs. Takada last year. But that concept was invented more than 20 years earlier.

Shozo "Strong" Kobayashi was the International champion of the No. 3 promotion in the country, the IWE. Inoki and Shinma were able to get Kobayashi to jump to their company, although they attempted to play it up originally as champion from one promotion vs. champion from the other in a time when promotions in Japan didn't work together. While IWE stripped Kobayashi of its title six weeks before the match, it became the hottest match in the short history of the company with Inoki solidifying his claim to be the biggest star in Japan when he beat Kobayashi in their first meeting on March 19, 1974 before 16,500 fans. He was able to pop a similar crowd later in the year for his first match against the No. 1 Korean wrestler of all-time, Oki.

Inoki took the fake shoot concept one step farther, by luring Wilhelm Ruska, an Olympic heavyweight gold medalist from Holland (opening up a Japan-Holland shootfighting connection that continues strong to this day), considered at the time the strongest judo fighter in the world. The first mixed martial arts match in the modern history of pro wrestling took place on February 6, 1976, with Inoki naturally going over. This began a plan which would end up with Inoki becoming the biggest sports star in his country and perhaps one of the biggest in the world.

But even the best laid plans....

Before the Ruska match, Inoki and Shinma had already put together a deal for the biggest match in the history of pro wrestling--Inoki vs. Muhammad Ali from Budokan Hall. Inoki, the world champion (well, NWF version) of pro wrestling, Ali, the biggest star in the history of boxing and the current world heavyweight champion. Between the money that could be generated in Japan, and the money they figured the combination of Ali's name and the answering of the question as to who would win between a boxer and a wrestler in the rest of the world since Ali was without question the most famous athlete in the world at the time--the big UFC question nearly 17 years ahead of its time, Inoki and Shinma had figured it to be the biggest money match in either boxing or wrestling history. Ali was offered \$6 million to do the match and do the job at the end, which would have been the biggest payoff of his career--bigger than any of the Frazier fights and with none of the health and danger risks involved, since the match was going to be a work.

The finish worked out would be for Ali to pummel Inoki with his boxing skills, bloodying him up. Gene LeBelle would be the referee. LeBelle, was a sometimes pro wrestler with a shooter rep from his days in judo, the brother of Mike, and better known as the obnoxious television announcer for the Los Angeles promotion that was Inoki's business partner and ironically now has gained a second life as a legendary magazine martial arts figure. LeBelle would continually want to stop the match but Inoki would refuse to allow him to check the cut, a common theme in pro wrestling in those days. Finally, Ali, being the sportsman that he was, would ask the ref to stop the match so he wouldn't have to give him more of a beating. At that point Inoki would make the big comeback, hit the enzuigiri, and score the pinfall. In the United States, the fans that liked Ali could point to the controversial finishing sequence, plus it would theoretically build to a rematch where all involved could line their pockets even more. In Japan, it was the typical Inoki gutsy finish. By beating Ali, he'd become a national hero in his country. In those days there was nothing the Japanese loved more than one of their own who could be the best in the world at something. And he's become a sports figure whose name would be known in every country, bigger than any wrestling star in history, including the elusive United States where after beating Ali, he could theoretically go into any arena and be a main event superstar draw.

Of all of Inoki and Shinma's business ideas that were successful and a few that weren't, this was the greatest idea of all. It also turned out to be the biggest failure of all.

This got a ton of publicity in the United States, but as the fight, set for June 25, 1976, was about to come down, reporters figured out the world martial arts champion was nothing more than a fake pro wrestler that they would see on Saturday afternoon television in the United States. The reporters who were to hype the show were largely the local boxing reporters, who had ties with the local boxing promoters. Since it was the pro wrestling promoters in most cases who were promoting the venues and the boxing promoters had been frozen out, the fact this was going to be pro wrestling business as usual, only on the largest scale ever, was hardly kept secret from the press. Inoki, with his large jaw, was nicknamed "The Pelican" by Ali in hyping the fight. Fred Blassie, a legend in Japan as a wrestler and a legendary talker, wrestler and manager in the United States, was sent around the country to be Ali's manager to hype the fight to the press and be a familiar heel name to wrestling fans. The idea of the match controlled by the pro wrestling promoters and not the boxing promoters was to make Ali, and thus boxing, as the heel, and pro wrestling, as the babyface. Inoki had also arranged for Chuck Wepner, a boxer who was the real-life person that was the inspiration to the original "Rocky" movie, to do a job for Andre the Giant at Shea Stadium, and at one point, Henry Clark, a ranked heavyweight, was to have a mixed match putting over then-NWA champion Terry Funk in an NWA city, the latter of which fell through well before the card ever took place. The matches would air on closed-circuit throughout the United States, theoretically drawing both the boxing audience and the wrestling audience.

A funny thing happened on the way to the payoff window. Everything fell apart. Outside of the Northeast (where Vince McMahon Sr., who had taken control of the show in the U.S. and had "lucked" into his hottest grudge match perhaps in history between Bruno Sammartino, coming back from nearly three months off with a broken neck, and Stan Hansen, who accidentally dropped Bruno on his head during their first meeting, as the top selling match to wrestling fans), the wrestling promoters of the NWA, with no representative on the big show and since it wasn't their idea, didn't want to push the concept to their local fans and the NWA still controlled most of wrestling in the U.S. and Canada. So with the lack of television wrestling hype in most markets, that was strike one. The media treated it as a farce basically saying it would be fixed, which was, in fact, the original idea. Strike two. Then, Ali, who no doubt was feeling tremendous pressure by this time from both the boxing community and the media in the U.S. for being part of this farce, got cold feet about doing the job.

It wasn't doing the work that was the problem or even making someone look good. Ali had already done an angle where he did a run-in during a Gorilla Monsoon match and Monsoon gave him an airplane spin and dropped him in the middle of the ring, and while leaving, Monsoon said for probably the first time and certainly not the last time, that Ali would get destroyed by Inoki because he "doesn't know a wristlock from a wrist watch." Ali also participated in three worked mixed matches on an AWA show in Chicago that aired on ABC's Wide World of Sports the week before the match, with Howard Cosell doing the commentary, not shilling for it a bit, and kept making the point that in all this nonsense, there is a chance of a mistake and Ali could get hurt. After Ali KO'd two AWA jobbers, he fought mid-card wrestler Buddy Wolfe, doing a fairly decent job selling for Wolfe's wrestling moves before pummeling him in his comeback, beating him when it was stopped on blood, and then laying a haymaker on Bobby Heenan who took the classic wrestling big bump, replayed over and over again on Wide World.

When Ali got to Japan, he expressed his concern. The match nearly fell apart. Inoki and Shinma, basically with their futures at stake, tried to save the venture. In the days prior to the match, the situation rapidly would change from the entire show was canceled, to it would be a shoot, to where they were still negotiating a finish. Finally, more negotiations had to take place, because if it were a shoot, they needed rules as Ali's side was not about to throw him in there with an unknown commodity in a no rules situation. In the event of them being unable to work out a finish (Inoki and Shinma weren't about to pay \$6 million to Ali and then have Inoki lose the match), rules were worked out that largely handicapped Inoki. Kicks to the head and throat were illegal, as were suplexes, chokes and Inoki couldn't punch the face bare knuckled. They literally were still trying to work out a finish until it was time to go out there and there they were, with no finish, with no high spots, in a real live contest with the world watching.

Luckily many people have seen the most recent Dan Severn-Ken Shamrock match. Take away with six minutes flurry between the 18:00 mark and the 24:00 mark, and you've got Ali vs. Inoki. Inoki laid on his back, attempting to kick at Ali's legs until Ali would eventually be slowed and Inoki could put him away, kind of an inverted version of what Marco Ruas was successful in doing to Paul Varelans. Round after round. Ali did go down two or three times, but before Inoki could do anything with him, he grabbed the ropes causing a break. Ali did, during the course of 15 rounds, land a total of six punches, none of which did much damage to Inoki. Ali's legs actually took so much damage from Inoki's kicks to behind the knee that he was hospitalized after the match and in the long run many think it quickened Ali's decline as a boxer, but the fact the fight was historically significant to Ali's career as a boxer meant nothing at that moment to anyone watching. Nevertheless, without getting so much as a scratch in the ring, Inoki was damaged worse than Don Frye against Mark Coleman. With no action, the fight was ruled a draw. Inoki, the wrestler, had laid on his back for the entire fight. Although this is a legitimate mixed martial arts fighting strategy (Yuki Nakai used it to beat the much larger Gerard Gordeau in a Vale Tudo match in 1994), like Severn employed with Shamrock, the public in Japan didn't know it. God knows nobody in the United States had a clue. Fans were furious and Inoki disgraced himself.

Because most of the wrestling promoters didn't push the show or Inoki hard, since he wasn't one of their boys, it ended up flopping financially as well as artistically, outside of the Northeast (where the live show drew 32,000 to Shea Stadium, one of the largest American crowds ever to that point and drew the biggest live gate in American pro wrestling history to that point and most Northeast cities did well on closed-circuit) and even there the draw was Bruno. Shinma and Inoki were destroyed financially, as was the reputation of pro wrestling in Japan as its biggest star embarrassed himself on a worldwide stage. Ali only ended up receiving closer to \$2 million and the whole thing wound up in lawsuits.

Looking back at this event 20 years later and having seen mixed matches, the irony is that if Inoki was a top-flight real wrestler, even under the rules that greatly handicapped him, he still should have taken Ali in a shoot. In other words, after the whole original plan that fell apart, the only thing that kept Inoki from being the biggest wrestling star in the world, and New Japan from being the biggest wrestling company of all-time, and Inoki becoming a sports celebrity worldwide of monumental proportions, was of all things, the fact he wasn't really a great wrestler. It was Royce Gracie or Dan Severn vs. Mike Tyson of their eras, but instead of it being Royce Gracie or Dan Severn, it was Shawn Michaels. Figuratively, at this point it appeared New Japan was caught in a Gracie choke and the ropes were five miles away. But like a New Japan match, it just set up another comeback. But this wasn't the last time New Japan Pro Wrestling would look like it was down for the count.

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The second night at Sumo Hall on 8/3 couldn't possibly live up to opening night. It was also the only non-sellout of the week, with the crowd announced as 10,500, which looked to be maybe a few hundred more than it really was. While it was a solid show with only two matches below average, it was the weakest show of the tournament.

1. Akitoshi Saito pinned Takaiwa in 13:04 after a cross arm german suplex. Very stiff early. It slowed in the middle. It picked up at the end with Takaiwa, who looked good once again, kicking out of one big move after another before finally losing. Another strong opener. \*\*\*

2. Goto & Nogami beat Nagata & Iizuka in 11:43. Nagata pretty well carried the match picking the crowd up with his fire and stiff offense. He was stuff piledriven on the floor and destroyed until he hit an overhead belly-to-belly out of nowhere and made the hot tag. Iizuka kept giving his foes uranages. Nagata tagged in for the finish, getting several near falls before being hit with Goto's back suplex for the pin. \*\*\*

3. In the J Crown, Shinjiro Otani (UWA light heavyweight champion) pinned Jose "Negro" Casas (NWA welterweight champion) in 11:34. Both looked good but there's an inherent style clash between Lucha and New Japan strong style, even though Otani is probably the most versatile pro wrestler in the world in that he can have a great match with nearly anyone of any style. It was damn good, but a little too Lucha oriented for the crowd. They went back-and-forth with near falls before Otani got the pin after a springboard spin kick. \*\*\*1/2

4. El Samurai--real name Osamu Matsuda (WWF light heavyweight champion) pinned Gran Hamada--real name Hiroaki Hamada (WWA junior light heavyweight champion) in 12:38. The WWF title belt was created in 1981 when New Japan and WWF had a working relationship (Shinma was the figurehead WWF President before Jack Tunney), largely for a two country feud in Japan and Mexico involving Hamada and heel rival Perro Aguayo. After Shinma was ousted from New Japan, Hamada went with him and it became exclusively a Mexican title with no actual WWF recognition except historically and returned to Japan recently when Great Sasuke won the belt, and lost it before the tournament to Samurai. The first half was slow. It picked up, but Hamada blew out his knee on his first plancha. They did an innovative spot where both were standing on the top rope like Hamada was doing to do a superplex, but Samurai bearhugged Hamada and both jumped off with Samurai sticking his knee under Hamada's crotch giving him basically a super reverse atomic drop for a big pop. Samurai wound up using a back superplex, which Hamada landed wrong on and blew out his shoulder, and then a power bomb for the pin. Samurai didn't do much and while Hamada worked very hard, age has taken its toll and he was pretty banged up. \*\*1/2

5. Tatsumi Fujinami & Osamu Kido beat Kengo Kimura (Takashi Kimura) & Fujiwara in 11:29 when Kimura pinned Kido with his Inazuma (leg lariat). Fujinami just looks out of place today. It's really sad. \*1/4

6. Sasaki (4) beat Junji Hirata (0) in an A block match in 5:08. The match seemed to be building fine when Hirata used a turning powerslam and his leg was in the wrong place and his knee went out bad. Sasaki then used his ipponzei but Hirata clearly was done and couldn't get up. It was clear it was no work. The match was stopped and Hirata had to be carried out on a stretcher and had to forfeit the rest of the tournament. What's significant is that the tournament is booked in such a manner that every match has a purpose when it's over, and they had to re-book the entire A block to get where they wanted to end up. In hindsight, it appears that Hirata was supposed to win this match since there was no upsets on this card, which forced the Choshu-Sasaki planned finish on 8/5 to change and left the A block decided going into 8/6. 1/2\*

7. Muto (2) pinned Kojima (0) in a B block match in 15:21. This match dragged early with Muto largely working on Kojima's left arm. A big spot was when Muto went for his handspring elbow into the corner but Kojima caught him with a rabbit lariat (lariat to the back of the head, also called enzui lariat). It picked up from there, with Muto ending up using three Dragon screws, a moonsault, and got the figure four on for the submission. \*\*1/2

8. Choshu (4) pinned Tenzan (0) in an A block match in 5:12. Choshu had hurt his right knee the previous night in having his best match in years so he didn't do much. Tenzan carried the short match. Finish saw Tenzan do two diving head-butts off the top rope, and as he pranced around and played to the crowd, Choshu got up, and when Tenzan turned around, Choshu hit him with a devastating lariat. Tenzan's eyes rolled he sold it so great, and the finish made sense in that everyone knew Tenzan had been legit knocked silly the previous night, and was pinned. \*1/4

9. Shiro Koshinaka (2) pinned Yamazaki (2) in a B block match in 13:50. Koshinaka is one of the all-time most underrated wrestlers in history. Both guys got huge reactions coming out. Both guys traded getting their shoulders posted. The early matwork got really good heat because the fans believe everything Yamazaki does. He held a chicken wing cross face twice with Koshinaka making the ropes. As Yamazaki went for a cross armbreaker, Koshinaka went after Yamazaki's broken fingers (suffered on the previous tour) and started

stomping and dropping knees. Yamazaki got more submissions with Koshinaka making the ropes. After two Dragon screws, Yamazaki missed an enzuigiri and Koshinaka immediately hit a power bomb for a near fall. After a back suplex and near fall, Koshinaka hit a second power bomb for the pin. Great match. \*\*\*3/4

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The financial and credibility damage from the Ali match nearly ruined New Japan. But largely through TV-Asahi, one of Japan's major networks which broadcast New Japan and did a Super Bowl like rating for the match, the company was kept afloat. To rebuild both Inoki and the company, several major things took place. The first was to remove the stench of the Ali match with a series of victories by Inoki over martial arts superstars. Ruka was brought back, as was another judo Olympic medalist, "Buffalo" Allen Coage, who later became a name pro wrestler as Badnews Allen. Karate stars Eddy "Monster Man" Everett and Willie Williams (who is still active today in Rings and has made himself a long career in Japan off losing a famous match to Inoki) and boxer Wepner were brought in along with Mike Dayton, a former Mr. America competitor who made a name for himself doing strongman stunts, and one or two obscure pro wrestlers who they masqueraded as martial arts stars. In addition, stemming from the Inoki-Ali deal, Shinma, Inoki and McMahon Sr. became business partners which gave Inoki access to WWF wrestlers. Andre the Giant became a regular top attraction doing the perhaps the best monster heel role in wrestling a decade before ever doing it in the United States, as did Hansen, beginning a career that would make him the biggest foreign star ever to appear in Japan. McMahon Sr. even sent the likes of Dusty Rhodes and Billy Graham to New Japan, and it was with New Japan in 1980, before the AWA or WWF, that Hulkamania was first created as the powerhouse blond with the huge physique who became the only person besides Inoki who could physically stand up to Andre. And Bob Backlund became a regular visitor as WWF champion.

After all his mixed match wins, Inoki was presented by McMahon a belt as WWF World Martial arts champion in late 1978. Inoki would often come to Madison Square Garden and defend the title. While he never got over big in New York and his matches were never highly pushed locally, the press in Japan attempted to create the mystique of Inoki as an international superstar playing up his WWF victories huge.

But that wasn't enough. Inoki's rival, Giant Baba, had held the NWA title, albeit for one week periods that ended when the original champion's tour was concluded, twice during the 70s. By this point, the two men who started together were involved in an all-out war for the top position in Japan. New Japan and McMahon Sr. put together a deal for Inoki to get the WWF title from Backlund, under similar circumstances. On November 30, 1979, Inoki pinned Backlund in Tokushima to become WWF champion, a result in all history books in Japan but never acknowledged by the WWF in the United States. That match was not a double cross. The rematch the next week was. On December 6 in Tokyo, Backlund was scheduled to regain the title and for Inoki to save face at home, his most bitter rival, Singh was to interfere in the finish. Which is what happened. However, Shinma, who was WWF President, declared the match no contest and ruled that Inoki was still champion. This resulted in a series of hot telegrams from LeBelle and McMahon to Japan. Since Inoki was scheduled to appear in Madison Square Garden on the January 1980 show which would be broadcast in Japan, Inoki apparently wanted his fans to see him as the main event champion defending the WWF title in Madison Square Garden once. McMahon, who had Bobby Duncum set up as Backlund's foil of the month, refused to acknowledge the Japanese angle. A compromise was worked out since the match aired in Japan, where it was announced in Japan that the title was held up, that Inoki, since he had already won the title, was already booked to defend his martial arts title on the card, so Backlund and Duncum would meet for the vacant title. Forget that Backlund was billed as champion on television and defending the title in the U.S. from the moment he returned from Japan. Nevertheless, if you watch a tape of that MSG house show, Backlund doesn't wear the belt coming to the ring, and ring announcer Howard Finkel doesn't announce him as champion in the pre-match ring introductions.

Perhaps the most heated period in the Baba-Inoki war was just about this time. Since he was never going to get the WWF title again, Inoki and Shinma decided to do one better, create the ultimate world heavyweight wrestling championship. Baba and Inoki actually worked together for the biggest all-star show up to that point in time in Japan in 1979, as a tag team beating Abdullah the Butcher and Tiger Jeet Singh. But after working one show together, the split afterwards left things even more bitter. Shinma and Inoki decided that to give the title credibility, that wrestlers from all over the world regardless of promotional affiliation would be involved. They created mythical tournament matches throughout the world and to show that, like the deal with Kobayashi years earlier, they got wrestlers from other promotions to join in to create the idea that while wrestling may be worked, these stakes are so big that this isn't. The IWE was about to go under so Inoki signed up its biggest stars, Rusher Kimura and Animal Hamaguchi, and created a worked interpromotional feud that set the stage for the glory days of New Japan. In addition, he raided two of All Japan's top foreign stars, Abdullah the Butcher and Dick Murdoch. Baba responded by raiding back Tiger Jeet Singh, Inoki's long-time top rival, and in the biggest coup of all, signed Stan Hansen.

Even though Baba still had most of the top American draws at the time except for Hogan, Andre and Butcher; the likes of Hansen, Bruiser Brody, The Funks, Harley Race, Mil Mascaras and NWA champion Ric Flair, New Japan's lead at the box office was beginning to become commanding. Yet, like in 1976, when things at the time couldn't possibly look better, the reality was they almost couldn't get worse.

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The third show at Sumo Hall was a Sunday afternoon show at 3 p.m. It wasn't the best show of the week, but did contain the best match of the week and one of the better matches of the year. The crowd was pretty well packed again with a crowd announced as a sellout 11,000. Perhaps this was the most impressive sellout of the week because it was only the midpoint of the tournament, the Olympics were closing down, and both All Japan women (which drew about 1,600 fans) and Universal Vale Tudo (which drew 3,200) were running shows that afternoon.

1. Ohara beat Nagata in 9:55. Another good opener particularly toward the finish with Ohara finally hitting his choke slam and going into a cross armbreaker for the submission. \*\*\*

2. Yasuda & Nishimura & Iizuka & Kido beat Goto & Akitoshi Saito & Kuniaki Kobayashi & Nogami in 14:45. Kido got a pretty good crowd reaction as a cult comedy figure, particularly when he did his wakigatamae (Fujiwara armbar). However, this match got dull, particularly with Iizuka vs. Nogami which continued to be dead. It finally got good toward the end with near falls going back and forth before Yasuda got a submission from Saito with the Boston Crab. There was a huge pop for the finish since, Yasuda, who has also become a cult figure, scored the win and also because at the finish, Kido had Kobayashi in the wakigatamae. \*1/2

3. Liger & Norio Honaga beat Casas & Takaiwa in 12:04. Honaga is in his last year, as he's expected to retire and become a referee in 1997. Casas pretty much carried the match as Takaiwa didn't show much, Honaga looked bad and Liger actually looked good but obviously was limited. He particularly got a big pop doing La Magistral on Liger. Casas did a senton off the apron and a tope. He busted his eye open legit hitting the guard rail on the tope, and later did a senton off the top rope. Honaga tried a Mexican submission move on Casas that was supposed to be the finish but the two didn't work it right and it looked bad, so Honaga then pinned Casas after a sunset flip. \*\*3/4

4. Dragon (WAR International jr. heavyweight & British jr. heavyweight champ) pinned Otani (UWA light heavyweight & NWA welterweight) in 16:04 to end up with four belts. Dragon tried La Magistral twice in the first 90 seconds but Otani blocked it both times. They went to matwork with them doing a great job exchanging holds. Otani was the best worker of the week because he's got the youthful athletic ability along with great facial expressions, charisma and psychology. Dragon can work to the level of anyone when he wants to, but due to so many

injuries, generally picks his spots and he picked this one. After Dragon missed a plancha to the floor, Otani hit a rolling bodyblock off the apron and got a near fall with the springboard spin kick that he beat Casas with which got a super pop. He then used a tiger suplex for Dragon kicked out, then missed a springboard dropkick. Dragon hit La Magistral but Otani kicked out. Dragon went for a huracanrana but Otani reversed it into a cradle. He followed getting near falls with a dragon suplex and a quebrada (springboard from the middle rope into the ring moonsault block). Otani came back with a dragon suplex. Otani then went for a superplex standing on the top rope but Dragon reversed it while both were standing into a combination gombuster into the ring and DDT off the top rope, with both selling the bump big. Dragon got up first and used a running power bomb for the pin. \*\*\*\*3/4

5. Sasuke (IWGP jr. heavyweight & NWA jr. heavyweight champ) pinned Samurai (WWA jr. light heavyweight & WWF light heavyweight champ) to capture four belts in 16:25. Samurai opened with a tope. The match was actually slow early before they kicked it in. Sasuke did an Asai-moonsault which wound up with both on the ringside tables on the tape machines and Samurai's back bending on the guard rail. Then Sasuke did his insane rider kick, which is a move where he climbs to the top rope, balances on the top of the post, leaps off deep into the aisle with a one-foot thrust kick. There is no way to do that move without hurting yourself and as spectacular as it looks, there's no way it's worth it. Sasuke is a fantastic worker but doing things like this is going to shorten his career. Anyway, instead of crashing his hip on the floor, he landed with his shoulder on the floor taking the brunt of the bump. After missing a quebrada in the ring, Samurai hit two reverse DDT's (Henry Godwinn's slop drop), but missing a head-butt off the top rope. Sasuke went for a brainbuster, but Samurai reversed it into a third reverse DDT and got a near fall with a thunder fire power bomb, followed by a superplex while standing on the top rope. Then came an even more spectacular series of moves as Sasuke came off the top rope but Samurai moved, however Sasuke rolled on the mat, landing on his feet rather than taking a bump and immediately hit a Frankensteiner, which Samurai reversed and which Sasuke then reversed for an incredible near fall. Sasuke quickly followed with a german suplex and power bomb for the pin. \*\*\*\*1/4

6. Yamazaki (4) beat Kojima (0) in a B block match in 9:56. Kojima worked on Yamazaki's bad hand, and Yamazaki came back working on Kojima's knee. The fans booed Kojima who did nothing but go for the bad hand. After trading some near falls and submissions, Kojima missed a moonsault and Yamazaki immediately put the cross armbreaker on for the submission. \*1/2

7. Tenzan (2) pinned Hashimoto (0) for the biggest win of his career in 11:27 in the A block. Hashimoto sold his knee big from the finish the first night and the match had super heat with the crowd roaring for the nearly immobile Hashimoto to come back despite being barely able to move. Hashimoto would make his comebacks with the hard kicks before Tenzan would kick the knee and get back in control. Finally Hashimoto went for a brainbuster but the knee gave out. Tenzan came off the top rope with two head-butts to the knee to get a near fall. He then put on the figure four, sloppy the first time since it's not his move, but got it on good the second time in the middle of the ring. Hashimoto managed to struggle to the rope, but was immobile there and Tenzan used another head-butt off the top rope to the knee for the pin. \*\*\*3/4

8. Koshinaka (4) beat Chono (2) in 22:10 in the B block. Even though this doesn't sound on paper like a big show main event, both got huge reactions coming out because each is considered the leader of one of the heel groups. They started fast but it got dead until the 10:00 mark. The matwork was pretty much boring. At that point they picked it up and it was excellent from there trading all kinds of big moves. Chono used an STF first at the 16:40 mark but Koshinaka made the ropes. Chono undid the turnbuckle padding and ran Koshinaka into the exposed metal twice. After trading more big moves, Koshinaka got behind Chono and went for the dragon suplex, but Chono kicked him low and put the STF on in the middle. Chono then switched it to a cross armbreaker but Koshinaka made the rope. They traded several more near falls before Chono hit a Yakuza kick but Koshinaka just stood there, came back with a butt bump and a power bomb for the pin. \*\*\*3/4

Choshu increased his point total to six winning via forfeit over Hirata, who was injured, to give him a 3-0 record.

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Perhaps the single most important concept Shinma and New Japan should be credited with is promoting junior heavyweight wrestlers on a major level in a top company. The junior heavyweight division had largely been dead in the United States after the mid-70s with the retirement of Danny Hodge, and in reality, even Hodge was only a big deal in the McGuirk (later Watts Mid South) territory where his real sports legend was well known. Although there had been previous junior heavyweight champions in Japan, it was never a big deal on any kind of level.

The concept may have been created as much out of necessity as anything else. Inoki had a young protege named Tatsumi Fujinami, who was a spectacular worker but too small at the time to be taken seriously by the standards of the day. At the same time, there was a lot of interest in Mexican wrestling because All Japan's Mil Mascaras had turned into an incredible drawing card with his unique moves and flashy ring costumes. Since most of the best wrestlers in Mexico were undersized by Japan standards, Shinma created both a WWF junior heavyweight championship (for Fujinami) and a light heavyweight championship (which actually never got over as big for Gran Hamada) and worked out a talent exchange deal with Francisco Flores, who headed the UWA, at the time the most successful promotion in the Mexico City area. The junior heavyweight title made Fujinami a star, and made stars out of his challengers like Chavo Guerrero, Canek, El Solitario, most importantly, Dynamite Kid, and a young man from Calgary named Bret Hart.

Eventually Fujinami became big enough to be considered a top heavyweight, but his move may have been prompted more by one of Shinma's greatest creations of all--Tiger Mask.

Satoru Sayama was a super athlete in the New Japan camp, the greatest flier ever in camp who was also particularly adept at kick boxing and he was a terrific shooter for his size as well. But he was only 5-5 and 160 pounds, far too small to be a pro wrestler in those days. He was sent away to both Mexico and England, where, to say he was a sensation would be the understatement of all-time. Sayama, who wrestled for less than two years total in Mexico, is generally considered high on any list of the all-time greatest wrestlers ever in that country and every Japanese wrestler who comes to the country is immediately and unfavorably compared with him. In England, under the name Sammy Lee, billed as a cousin of Bruce Lee, he became a phenom as well with his feud with Mark "Rollerball" Rocco.

Tiger Mask was originally a popular television cartoon in Japan, with a pro wrestling theme. Tiger Mask was an orphan who learned to wrestle, who had a twin brother that he didn't even know he was related to who became his biggest rival, the hated Black Tiger, a role played in the Tiger Mask wrestling days by Rocco. And he had a big friend called the Giant Zebra. Ironically, the Giant Zebra in the cartoon was supposed to be a secret animated version of Giant Baba. Shinma, in order to appeal to young children who were largely in the All Japan camp due to the popularity of Mascaras and Terry Funk, since the teenage and young adult audience were Inoki's core crowd due to the martial arts matches, wanted to create a real-life version of Tiger Mask and make him a small speedy wrestler so young children could empathize with him. The choice came down to Sayama or Hamada, both of whom were exceptional but smaller wrestlers. In April of 1981, Sayama debuted under the mask against Dynamite Kid, who would go on to be his legendary rival. While kids immediately took to the character, the hardcore audience didn't like the gimmick. The costume was too cartoonish for the hardcore Japanese audience used to black boots and black tights, plus he was too small. But after dispatching of one wrestler after another from Mexico using a style never seen before in Japan, eventually the hardcore audience had to admit Sayama was something special. Fujinami moved up to the heavyweight division, and on January 1, 1982, Sayama defeated Kid to become WWF junior heavyweight champion. He later defeated Les Thornton to become NWA junior heavyweight champion and for the most part held both titles until August of 1983, when he announced his retirement. Shortly

after that retirement ended the period where everything New Japan did turned to gold.

After the IWE feud came perhaps the biggest and among the most important angle in the history of the Japanese business. Riki Choshu, who was basically No. 4 on the pecking order behind Inoki, Fujinami and Sakaguchi, did a fake shoot angle where he was frustrated and turned on Fujinami. Choshu formed a group called Ishingun (the current Heisei Ishingun group is a modern day copy of that angle), a supposed promotion within a promotion to feud with the established New Japan stars, called Seikigun. The combination of foreign stars like Hogan, Andre and Butcher, the Ishingun vs. Seikigun Japanese feud and Tiger Mask and rivals like Dynamite Kid, Black Tiger (Mark Rocco), Steve Wright, Hamada, Bret Hart and Kuniaki Kobayashi in the middle spelled the greatest run of box office success perhaps in the modern history of wrestling. New Japan sold out 90% of its dates over a one year period. Its television show aired in Prime Time on Saturday nights and drew between a 20 and 25 rating every week, making it usually among the top five television shows in the country. It set the stage for the monthly magazines to go weekly and placed Japan as the worldwide hotbed and revolutionary force in pro wrestling.

Up to that point, with the exception of the rare interpromotional match like Inoki's earlier matches with Kimura and Strong Kobayashi, the top drawing matches in Japan and virtually all the main events involved Japanese vs. Foreigner. The bigger name the foreigner, the more money the feud would draw, which enabled the few foreigners with huge names or karate stars willing to help in the creation of Inoki's illusion to make the biggest payoffs anywhere in the world at the time while wrestling in Japan. However, Choshu's charisma on top changed the equation for ever more, and was the beginning of what is today's Japanese wrestling world.

And then, as quick as it all came, it was over. While Inoki and Shinma had created one of the great business booms ever, suddenly it was no longer the Inoki one-man show but an entire card of super over monster draws. With their singles feud over the WWF International heavyweight title, Fujinami and Choshu suddenly became stars of almost the same magnitude of Inoki. Perhaps nobody would have figured it out for many years either except another of those funny things happened on June 2, 1983.

For more than two years, Inoki had created a phony world wide IWGP heavyweight tournament with announcing standings and results involving some of the biggest names in the world until the finals were scheduled in May of 1983. It turned out to be one of the biggest tournaments in history, and came down to Inoki and Hogan. While Inoki was on the ring apron, in one of the most famous spots in Japanese wrestling history, Hogan ran across the ring and gave him a lariat, which at the time was his finishing move in Japan since they never would accept the legdrop as a finishing move. Inoki hit his head on the floor, panic ensued, Inoki swallowed his tongue, was totally unconscious. Inoki couldn't continue get up, was thrown back in the ring by the wrestlers around the ring, I guess hoping for a miracle in that Hogan would find a way to pin himself, but Inoki didn't move and after a lot of confusion, the match was stopped. Hogan's first pro wrestling world title was not the one part of a well thought out marketing plan and Hogan had the title Inoki had spent years building up for himself to win. Inoki was hurt so badly from the fall that he was out of action for three months, and it was years before he fully recovered his stamina. He was really never the same physically on a consistent basis although he did have a few memorable matches over the years, including one as late as January 4, 1996 against Vader.

Everyone figured business would drop without the big star on the shows. But Choshu and Tiger Mask and Fujinami were so hot that the company continued to sellout every night. Suddenly the other headline wrestlers realized they should be all earning a lot more money when they were on top with all the sellout houses. Exactly what happened behind-the-scenes at this point isn't well documented, but the end results once again changed the face of wrestling history.

With Shinma running the business, he and Inoki had used company money to save Inoki's side businesses that weren't as successful. The

money from all the sellout houses disappeared to save Inoki's outside interests as fast as it came and then some. The wrestlers, furious about the embezzlement of funds, attempted a coup, similar to what Baba and Inoki tried more than a decade earlier. When the coup failed, it was Sayama who was in the Inoki position, in that he was the one about to take some major heat. Rather than face the repercussions, he suddenly retired, but the details of Inoki and Shinma's being caught embezzling millions from the company went public.

Inoki had to give up his Presidency of the company, and Shinma, the booker and Chairman of the Board, who was the mastermind behind creating what at the time was the biggest wrestling promotion probably in history--basically the creator of the Inoki illusion, the Tiger Mask explosion and the Choshu revolution, was the big scapegoat, having to resign completely. Inoki returned as a wrestler, but by this point feelings had embittered toward him. The company proved it could draw without him, physically he was past his prime, yet he continued to be on top and would never put over the upcoming stars. Choshu and Fujinami's feud was still on fire, even after a multitude of double count out finishes on major shows. When the public first heard word about the embezzlement scandal involving the wrestling hero, business dropped, similar to a post-strike atmosphere in baseball, at least after the early strikes. And like with baseball, a few months later, fans forgot and business was strong. But the bitterness remained.

First Shinma, mad because he was the scapegoat and with plenty of ideas left, created his own promotion, the Universal Wrestling Federation, and went about his new job of creating his second Inoki, a 24-year-old former karate star named Akira Maeda. Shinma initially got the backing from the WWF and sent Maeda there to win the International title that Fujinami and Choshu had feuded over. But that deal fell apart while Maeda was on tour, and suddenly Maeda, sent to the WWF as a star, was forced to do jobs every night. Maeda brought his trainer, Yoshiaki Fujiwara, and his "little brothers" in New Japan with him to UWF, Nobuhiko Takada, the young wrestler with perhaps the most potential of all, and Kazuo Yamazaki, the long-time training partner of Sayama. Shinma also convinced veterans including Rusher Kimura to join with his group and even made a play for Inoki to leave New Japan although Inoki apparently agreed at one point and then backed out. Karl Gotch was then hired as trainer, and Gotch tried to convince the wrestlers to change the style to something more serious and realistic. The UWF became the first pure shoot illusion--illusion in that it was simply just a stiffer work but paved the way to a whole new trend in Japanese wrestling, a nine-year long journey from fake shoots popular only among hardcores in Tokyo, to a brief period as the most successful promotion in the world, all the way to the end products, today's UFC, Vale Tudo (which Sayama is now a promoter of), Pancrase and K-1 kick boxing.

Ironically, Shinma was booted out of the group he created before long. With the company's new direction not exactly setting the world on fire, some of the wrestlers went to Sayama, the retired superstar who, while a great flier and Lucha stylist, still in his heart always preferred a more realistic style from his kick boxing and shooting background. Sayama, who had written a wrestling expose called "Kayfabe" during his period out, talking about the scandal and the fact wrestling matches were predetermined, agreed to come back for a huge payoff. Having Sayama work greatly boosted the group's credibility and they became a hot cult ticket in Tokyo, although still had trouble drawing elsewhere. Sayama made a he goes or I go ultimatum regarding Shinma, as the bitter feelings remained from the New Japan period, and the wrestlers backed Sayama. However, Sayama and Maeda ended up with an ego clash of their own one year later while the company was falling apart in the middle of its own gangster scandal. In September of 1985, about 18 months after its debut, the first UWF ran its final wrestling show and Sayama retired for the second time.

There was even more bad news on the horizon. A second IWGP heavyweight title tournament was held in 1984, with Inoki set to win the title he had built up for himself and gaining revenge for his loss to Hogan. However, by this time, Hogan was WWF champion and on the verge of becoming the biggest mat star on the planet. Hogan didn't want to do a clean job, no doubt nor did his promoter, Vince McMahon Jr., want him to, but Inoki definitely had to go over this time. A compromise finish was worked out where they would twice do double count outs and have the match restarted, and at the finish, Choshu



would come out and give both Hogan and Inoki lariats outside the ring. Inoki would crawl in before the count and win the match via count out. That compromise was the worst thing possible for business, not that it would be the last time Hogan would be involved in a finish described afterwards as that. Fans were so fed up with the finish that they rioted, destroying the hallowed building and were setting fires. The rioting lasted for something like 20 minutes, and when the dust cleared, New Japan was banned from its big show arena for one year, killing its chances of doing monster gates. TV-Asahi was getting a really bad taste in its mouth about the people who ran the company and the fans who attended the matches.

That was hardly the biggest blow to New Japan. In late 1984, Naoki Otsuka, New Japan's leading house show promoter, had a falling out with the hierarchy as well and initially wanted to create his own company using Choshu as the top draw. While that never got started, Otsuka worked together with Baba behind-the-scenes and Choshu, Masa Saito, Animal Hamaguchi, Yoshiaki Yatsu, Kobayashi, Super Strong Machine, Hiro Saito, Dynamite Kid, Davey Boy Smith and a half-dozen others left New Japan for All Japan, changing the balance of power completely. With Inoki's rep in shambles, and almost all its biggest stars walking out, TV-Asahi, which kept the company afloat after the embezzlement scandal, had seen just about enough. It literally came down to Fujinami, who both All Japan and UWF were courting, as to the survival of the company. Fujinami stayed. The network kept the company going, and in 1985, Inoki got a measure of retribution by stealing one of Baba's biggest stars, Bruiser Brody. The Inoki-Brody feud picked business up from its low levels. All Japan had taken advantage of Inoki's weaknesses and rebounded with fresh matches to become the dominant force in Japanese wrestling. The signing of Brody to what at the time was the biggest money per week deal probably in the history of wrestling up to that point, drew strong enough television ratings, usually between a 15 and a 20, sometimes higher for the Inoki-Brody singles bouts, that the danger of the network folding the company had ceased.

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The biggest match in the history of junior heavyweight wrestling, at least on the surface, took place on 8/5. Both Ultimo Dragon and Great Sasuke came out with four models apiece, each holding a title belt over their heads. The two themselves were an amazing story. Yoshihiro Asai was part of the New Japan dojo, but couldn't make the grade, largely because of his size. But he wanted to be a wrestler so bad that, similar to Keiichi Yamada a few years earlier, he flew to Mexico and in a foreign country knowing nothing except that it was the land of Mil Mascaras, turned himself into a great wrestler and returned to Japan and made a big hit. Masanori Murakawa, who came from a more upper class background, would literally follow wrestling tours around the country as a teenager. He turned pro with a couple of his friends as an undercard green wrestler in the Lucha style promotion run by Shinma's son where Asai had become the top draw. Murakawa first went under the name Masa Michinoku, which means "Masa on the way" (current wrestler Taka Michinoku, is not his brother, but a kid who grew up wanting to be the next "Takada on the way") Asai became Murakawa's teacher and as often happens, within a few years, the student surpassed the teacher. Doing daredevil moves that were beyond anything seen to that point in Japan, the Great Sasuke started to develop a following. Murakawa started his own Lucha promotion in Japan, doing the bookkeeping himself in the morning, and became the Japanese version of Smoky Mountain Wrestling, going into tiny villages at the local high school or rec center running shows in which they ran on such a tight budget that they didn't even bring chairs--the fans would sit on the floor and watch the matches from close range. Now that they're more successful, sitting on the floor and watching Michinoku pro has become a cult thing in the Northeastern section of Japan. Nobody that goes to the shows wants to sit in chairs. It was the biggest match of their careers, but like everything else in wrestling, things don't always end up as they seem.

1. Otani beat Nagata in 12:56 with an achilles tendon submission. After Otani's great performance the previous night, he did a totally different match this time, total UWFI style on the mat exchanging holds with some suplexes at the end. A great opener. \*\*\*1/2

2. Goto pinned Hiro Saito in 10:42 after two back suplexes. The first half of the match was terrible, mainly brawling with no heat. Saito picked things up and carried Goto to a really good and very heated last few minutes, doing senton after senton on him for near falls. \*\*

3. Kobayashi & Nogami beat Liger & Samurai in 14:24. Liger did a lot of comedy early. Eventually the heels stuff piledrove him on the floor. Kobayashi did a superplex on Samurai and Nogami followed with a splash off the top (the old Power & Glory finisher) for a near fall. Samurai also kicked out of a stuff power bomb and Kobayashi's trademark fisherman suplex. Finally Liger mad the hot tag and eventually gave Kobayashi a plancha. In the ring, Samurai got a near fall with a german suplex on Nogami. When he tried a second, Nogami reversed it and used a rolling german suplex (a series of two in a row rolling and holding onto the first once) to score the pin. \*\*\*1/4

4. Fujinami beat Nishimura in 7:32 with an abdominal stretch, one of Inoki's 70s finishers that was called in those days the grand cobra twist. Another dead match with Fujinami using a total 70s style, including doing two Billy Robinson backbreakers to set up the abdominal stretch. 1/4\*

5. Hashimoto & Kojima beat Akitoshi Saito & Ohara in 13:48. This match was incredible. Hashimoto limped to the ring and the New Japan doctor got in his way and tried to tell him not to work. Hashimoto shoved him aside, but then while in the ring, apologized to him. The doctor stayed at ringside during the match and kept teasing he was on the verge of stopping it. Kojima reminds me of the Nasty Boys with similar charisma but a lot more talent. Ohara and Kojima slapped the hell out of each other. Hashimoto tagged in and they went right for the right knee. The match had tremendous heat and was worked more of a U.S. faces vs. heel style with Ohara and Saito continually working the knee. Finally Hashimoto hit a DDT on Ohara and tagged out. Kojima was doubled on but kicked out of a power bomb. After a few more near falls on Kojima, with his back turned, Hashimoto slapped Kojima's back without him knowing it to tag in. They continued working the knee with Hashimoto making explosive comebacks. Finally Hashimoto went for his brainbuster, and at the top, teased the knee giving way as it had the night before. Finally the knee gave out again in the middle of the move, but Ohara was already up, so Ohara landed even harder on his head and was pinned. Ohara was carried from the ring while Hashimoto laid there immobile for several minutes before being helped back. An incredible performance by Hashimoto. \*\*\*\*

6. Sasuke captured all eight belts pinning Dragon in 13:56. The match had great atmosphere between all the belts and the teacher vs. student storyline, with Yuji Yasuroka seconding Dragon and Tiger Mask seconding Sasuke. They started with fast moves like arm drags in the ring. Dragon used the dragon screw into a Texas cloverleaf for a near submission. Later Dragon faked a dive, then backed off, and went for the tope. Dragon then hit the move he made famous, the Asai moonsault, but all the years of doing moves like that have taken its toll and his right knee went out. In the ring he used a brainbuster and Liger bomb for near falls but was limping really bad. With both men standing on the top rope, Sasuke did a standing dropkick which sent Dragon to the floor. Sasuke hit his own Asai moonsault and got up limping as well. In the ring, Sasuke missed a moonsault and Dragon used a tiger suplex for a near fall. Dragon went behind Sasuke while both were on the top rope to do a rana off the top, but turned it into a huracanrana for a near fall. He teased doing a power bomb off the apron (the move Dos Caras did to Sasuke last year which, as ironies would have it, cracked Sasuke's skull), but Sasuke blocked it. Sasuke then did the crazy move of the match. He went to the top apparently for another Rider kick, but instead balanced himself on the post and pushed off, flying way out in the aisle and doing a full flip. Unfortunately, Dragon was even farther out and didn't catch him, and in the turning, landed with the back of his head cracking on the floor. It was serious enough that he groggily got into the ring and told the ref he was hitting the finish as quick as possible. Sasuke missed another moonsault, Dragon got a near fall with La Magistral. As Dragon went for a power bomb, it was turned into a Frankensteiner. Dragon didn't know it was the finish but Sasuke and the ref did, and the ref counted three even though Dragon actually kicked out. The finish looked bad because of that. The finish was supposed to come four spots later, with Dragon using the running power bomb he used to beat Otani the previous night, and Sasuke turning that into a Frankensteiner the second time and getting

the pin. The President of TV-Asahi came into the ring to present Sasuke with an award. Somehow I don't think the President of NBC would do that after the main event at Wrestlemania. Sasuke left amidst a celebration carrying six belts around his arms and wearing two around his waist. \*\*\*\*1/4

Inoki came out to a thunderous ovation every night just before intermission. Ovations the likes of which no other wrestler alive could get except in their wildest imagination. When he came out this time, he mentioned how spectacular a match it was and that it must have been, since when he was a wrestler, he only had one belt.

7. Chono (4) beat Yamazaki (2) in 12:25 in a B block match. It started fast and soon slowed. Then Chono got heat working on Yamazaki's fingers. Yamazaki got a choke right in the middle with apparently no escape, however Chono broke it by going after the finger again. Chono finally got the STF in the middle, and at the same time bent the bad hand back in a wristlock and Yamazaki submitted. \*\*

8. In a match to determine the A block championship and a slot in the finals, Choshu (8) beat Sasaki (4) in 15:13. Another teacher vs. protege match with great heat. Very stiff but also simple when it came to moves. They traded head-butts and Sasaki kept using the Power strangle for near submissions and Choshu having to go to the ropes. By the third time, there was super heat. After Choshu broke the move, Sasaki went for a pin but Choshu kicked out to a huge pop. Choshu then began hitting lariats, but on the third one, Sasaki caught him in the ipponzei but somehow while doing the move, Choshu caught him in a Rickson Gracie choke while on top. Sasaki was smothered underneath and you couldn't see him as Choshu had him buried. Ref Hattori was selling it like crazy frantically trying to check Sasaki but being unable to see him tap or go out. After a long time with Choshu on top, the ref stopped the match. What hurt the finish was when Sasaki finally got up, he complained to Hattori that he had never submitted, and Choshu then hit him with a lariat and ordered Hattori to count to three. The American style post-match was flat and kind of killed Sasaki the next night. Apparently the original plan was for Sasaki to beat his teacher for the first time on this show, which would set up a playoff the next day after Sasaki beat Hashimoto, which Choshu would then win. \*\*\*\*1/2

9. Muto (4) beat Koshinaka (4) in 11:59 in a B block match. Muto needed the win here or he'd be mathematically eliminated. The match actually started out a little weak since Koshinaka's knee went out doing a spot so the spot looked bad and Muto had to put him in a resthold. When he was recovered, they made up for lost time with Muto doing all his signature spots (handspring elbow, facebuster, dropkick off the top) and finally went for a Frankensteiner off the top rope but Koshinaka held on and Muto landed on his head. Koshinaka hit one big move after another for near falls which got big pops as Muto kept kicking out. Finally Muto hit the dragon screw and followed it with a dropkick off the top rope to the back. He put Koshinaka on the top as if he was going to Frankensteiner or superplex him, but instead used a dragon screw, followed by a moonsault and went for the figure four, but Koshinaka turned it into an inside cradle for a near fall. Koshinaka then one big move after another in rapid succession for near falls before Muto caught him with another dragon screw and got the figure four on in the middle. Probably the best finish of the entire week. \*\*\*\*1/4

The show itself was the best one of the tournament. But the post match had a bad note. Sasuke had to be taken to the hospital. He cracked his head in two places landing doing the flip dive while kicking off the ringpost. He needed five stitches to close one of the cuts, but fractured his skull, apparently similar to his injury against Dos Caras. He was then allowed to leave the hospital in Tokyo the next morning but had to check into the hospital in his home town of Aomori in Northern Japan.

In the tournament, Hashimoto (2) technically got a forfeit win over Hirata, but it really didn't matter since he was mathematically eliminated. Choshu was in the finals. In the B block, Koshinaka, Chono and Muto all had 2-1 records and four points. Koshinaka had a match with Kojima, which he figured to win, and Muto and Chono were to face each other. If there was a tie, there would be a playoff with the winner facing Choshu later that night.

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After the UWF folded, Maeda, Takada, Fujiwara and Yamazaki returned to New Japan in January of 1986, but it was a short but important trip. The wrestlers all had nowhere else to go. And New Japan needed them, since it was trying to remove the stench from a screwed up tag team tournament which ended 1985. Inoki & Sakaguchi were scheduled to face Brody & Jimmy Snuka. A few days before the finals, Brody, who went to Japan in a bad mood to begin with, had a singles match with Sakaguchi, a huge former national judo champion, turn into a semi-shoot with Brody using his chain and attacking Sakaguchi's knee. Since Sakaguchi was the President of the company, Brody figured his days were numbered and on the train as they were going to Tokyo for the championship match, Brody simply got off the train. Snuka, to show loyalty to Brody, got off with him. Trying to make the best of a horrible situation, a no-show in the tag tournament finals, Inoki & Sakaguchi wrestled Fujinami & Kengo Kimura in the impromptu finals, and for the first time, Inoki allowed his protege Fujinami to pin him.

Maeda's return was the next stage of the interpromotional angle, this time bigger than ever. There was more box office power in Inoki vs. Maeda than any wrestling match in company history. Only one problem. Maeda absolutely refused to put Inoki over. At one point, booking without a finish in mind or perhaps with the traditional double count out in mind, New Japan announced an Inoki vs. Maeda match for Sumo Hall, and sold all 11,000 tickets in a few hours. However, they had to change it to a ten-man tag match main event with the UWF vs. New Japan because Maeda wouldn't put Inoki over, or even work with him, and worse than that, there was legitimate fear what Maeda would do in the ring to Inoki. However, the Maeda submission oriented style, while able to sell a lot of tickets for the right dream match, wasn't as successful to the casual fans who didn't understand the less flashy submission moves. While 1986 educated a lot of casual fans to submissions and paved the way for the future success of shoot style pro wrestling that followed a few years later, TV ratings fell and New Japan eventually lost its Saturday night prime time slot.

Maeda was a combination charismatic star and problem. He couldn't work well with Americans, but had great matches with Japanese. They had a goldmine match but couldn't put it on because neither would do a job or even make the other look good, or for fear, like in Maeda's famous match with Andre the Giant, it would turn into an uncooperative disaster. All these things built Maeda's reputation with the younger fans and he was still expected to be the Inoki of the future. That was only made clearer when New Japan went back to the old formula, the mixed martial arts match, booking a double main event on October 9, 1986-- Maeda against a former world light heavyweight kick boxing champion named Don Nakaya Neilsen, Inoki against a former heavyweight boxing champion Leon Spinks. The show drew a sellout crowd, but more importantly, drew a 29 rating on television. Things couldn't have gone better for Maeda, as he and Neilsen put on the greatest mixed match, at least up until that time, in history, while Spinks was a total disaster as an opponent to put over Inoki. The clamor was greater than ever to build the company around Maeda.

New Japan got another boost when the prodigal son, Choshu, returned in mid-1987 after leaving All Japan while holding its PWF heavyweight title, bringing back most of the wrestlers he took with him. Suddenly New Japan had talent like in the glory days, but so much damage had been done over the previous four years that neither the crowds nor television ratings picked up like everyone thought Choshu's return would do. With Choshu and company back, Maeda was suddenly no longer the flavor of the month. Which leads to...the shoot kick.

The original UWF, idolized by the teenagers of that time as the real deal, was a hot ticket at Korakuen Hall in Tokyo, but really nowhere else. After the promotion folded and Maeda and Takada returned to New Japan, the New Japan Korakuen Hall shows were considered UWF home court. A six-man tag was scheduled at Korakuen Hall in November of 1987 with Choshu's team against Maeda's and rumors were flying several days beforehand that something was going to happen. As Choshu held Osamu Kido in a scorpion, leaving himself wide open, Maeda threw a legitimate kick as hard as he could to Choshu's eye. While it didn't knock Choshu down, it did bust his eye

and break an orbital bone. New Japan was faced with one major predicament. What Maeda did was simply shoot a kick in a style that worked kicks were thrown regularly. To make a big deal about it publicly would be basically a public admittance wrestling was a work and let everyone know the kick was a shoot. To ignore it would be even worse for business, because anarchy could take over in a minefield of egos. Maeda was immediately suspended, and New Japan laid out a series of stipulations which he'd have to follow, such as spending several months in Mexico where he'd have to do Lucha style and make little money, and when he returned, put Choshu over clean in a singles match (Maeda had not done a job for any Japanese wrestler except Fujiwara, who had a shooter reputation, since his return), as his punishment. Maeda refused and never wrestled for New Japan again. Yet his cowardly act ironically made him (along with Hulk Hogan) one of the two hottest wrestlers in the world. A very minor incident took place that same week. A hot-headed 18-year-old wrestler who was the star of the dojo, with such amazing potential that was already wowing fans in prelim matches was also suspended, in this case for punching out a cab driver. His name was Masaharu Funaki. Business dropped in the tag tourney with Maeda suspended and Choshu injured, to the point that only 5,000 fans attended the finals of the 1987 tag tournament, while at the same time, All Japan was on fire as it brought back Brody, Butcher and Snuka for its tag tournament.

At this time, Inoki went for a WWF angle instead of a New Japan angle. He got the man who ruled the night time air waves in Japan, the Japanese equivalent to Johnny Carson in those days, to become manager for a new monster superstar by the name of Big Van Vader. Jim Hellwig was originally supposed to be the monster who was going to be pushed as the new generation Stan Hansen or Hulk Hogan. Hellwig, however, went with the WWF, leaving New Japan with a second choice--Leon White. White's debut, beating Inoki in 2:00 at Sumo Hall, was disastrous since the place was sold out based on an Inoki vs. Choshu main event. With fans mad after an angle that saw Inoki want to face the debuting monster instead of Choshu, they ended up first having Inoki beat Choshu in a quick 6:00 match, followed by Inoki losing in almost a squash to an unknown in order to make his rep immediately. At the time, Vader was a large green wrestler and his beating Inoki caused the place to riot. The talk show host immediately bailed out of the angle. Ironically, over the next year, while feuding with Fujinami, Vader became the most improved wrestler in the game and after that disastrous debut, turned into exactly what New Japan was hoping for, the next generation version of Stan Hansen.

Rather than return to New Japan, Maeda got financing to form the second version of the UWF, with Takada, Yamazaki, Fujiwara and some time later, Funaki and Minoru Suzuki following suit. The UWF with its more realistic style, sold out every card but one during 1988 and 1989, most in a manner of hours. All Japan and New Japan had made a habit of double count out finishes when big stars were matched against each other, while UWF ended every match with a submission or knockout. Fans at the All Japan and New Japan shows started reacting very negatively when the finishes weren't clean, and the promotions had no choice but to change decade long booking patterns created basically to "protect" the stars.

This was also the beginning of the end of Inoki as a full-time wrestler. After Inoki broke his foot, Fujinami beat Big Van Vader to finally escape the shadow of Inoki and win his first world heavyweight title. After carrying Inoki to his first classic match in years, a 60:00 draw where Fujinami retained the title, Fujinami, in the No. 2 slot for so long, pulled his own power play, threatening to leave the company unless he was treated as the No. 1 star. It worked for a short time as Fujinami headlined while Inoki sat out and crowds dwindled, so Inoki was asked back once again for his last run on top.

With business slow, Inoki went back to his past. With communism crumbling in the Soviet Union, it was Inoki who was the first person to negotiate the deal to bring in Soviet amateur athletic stars into professional sports. The latest fake shoot, in that people believed these legitimate Soviets with no understanding or knowledge of pro wrestling wouldn't do lay down and do jobs for wrestlers, led to the biggest crowd in the history of Japanese wrestling up to that point--53,800 fans and a world record \$2,781,000 house at the Tokyo Dome on April 24, 1989 to see Inoki, knowing it was time to change the formula, putting over Soviet judo champion Shota Chochyashvili via a

fifth round knockout finish, thus finally losing his first mixed match and his World Martial Arts title. Since that time, New Japan has promoted annual shows at the Dome, with it selling out the building quickly for the second show, on February 10, 1990, drawing nearly twice as many fans as Mike Tyson vs. Buster Douglas did in the same building the night before for an interpromotional match as New Japan's Choshu & George Takano faced All Japan's Genichiro Tenryu & Tiger Mask (Mitsuharu Misawa) and selling out most of the others since. By 1995, New Japan ran three dome shows, two in Tokyo, one in Fukuoka and drew more than 300,000 fans over two days at May Day Stadium in North Korea.

It was on the first Tokyo Dome show that New Japan went back to its past once again, attempting to create a second Tiger Mask type character in Keiichi Yamada, taking the Japanese comic book and television cartoon character of Jushin Liger. After Sayama retired, New Japan took George Takano, and put him under the hood as The Cobra. Coming so soon after Sayama, even though Takano was a talented wrestler, he lacked charisma and couldn't stand up to the obvious comparisons and the gimmick fizzled, although not before Cobra had some memorable matches. After Cobra was scrapped, the junior heavyweight division revolved around a classic feud between Takada's UWF style and Koshinaka's traditional pro wrestling style. After Takada went back to UWF, Koshinaka's new rival became Hiroshi Hase, who eventually dropped the title to Liger.

Liger went on to become the best wrestler in the world for a time, and through his own booking and creation of a new generation of Dynamite Kids (Chris Benoit), Black Tigers (Eddie Guerrero) and Bret Harts (Dean Malenko), the junior heavyweight division flourished like never before. Finally, some 15 years after Tiger Mask lit up the stage in Japan, junior heavyweights like Shawn Michaels, Benoit, Rey Misterio Jr., Guerrero and the like appear to be leading the future path of American wrestling.

Inoki's grip on the top was loosening, so he saved face and announced in 1989 he was retiring from wrestling full-time to run for the Japanese senate. He actually won the election, in a typical Inoki finish, winning in a close call as the final ballots were being counted. Ironically, Inoki in infrequent doses is now far more popular and much more of a drawing card and legend today than he was during his mythical heyday against the martial artists and Tiger Jeet Singh. After Choshu, Fujinami and Vader traded the world title back-and-forth, it was time for today's New Japan to take over, the one-time three Musketeers of Muto, Chono and Hashimoto. And a few years later, they'll pave the way for the likes of Tenzan, Kojima, Otani and Nagata. During this period, Choshu, who nearly killed the company with his jump, along with allies Hase and Masa Saito pretty much took over the political power within the company and drove it to its current heights. Fujinami, ironically the man who saved the company back in 1984 when it was at death's door and the only star who remained loyal to the company during the bad times, ended up out of the political power and the No. 1 spot that he spent most of his life waiting patiently for Inoki to vacate.

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Things were at a fever pitch for what everyone figured to be Choshu's last hurrah on 8/6. Like Connors in his last U.S. Open, he had long since come full circle, from the rebellious bad guy with so much charisma that he changed decade long booking patterns, to the veteran whose days as a headliner seemed over but for this one week, he was attempting to relive his glory days. The plan worked, which is the beauty of pro wrestling, in that unlike real sports and the Jimmy Connors story, stories like this can be written for maximum drama and emotion and with the right finish, and this was Choshu himself writing the beginning of his final story as a wrestler. The asking price on the street for tickets was \$100 if you were lucky, \$200 if you weren't. After two straight days as the leading sports story, obviously an SRO crowd announced at 11,500 was going to be there. But although Choshu wrote and nearly executed his perfect story, reality again struck and Choshu wasn't the story.

1. Iizuka & Yasuda & Takaiwa beat Ohara & Nogami & Goto in 11:36. Reality set in early as Yasuda, the cult favorite, looked clumsy as ever in the early going killing all the crowd heat. The guys chopped the hell

out of each other to where everyone's chest was covered with bruises. It never got going, although the final few minutes of near falls got great crowd heat. Yasuda pinned Nogami with a pathetic splash off the top rope, in that Yasuda's feet landed on the mat well before his body landed on Nogami. \*1/4

2. Nagata & Nishimura upset Hiro Saito & Tenzan in 11:32. This wasn't good either, even with Nagata involved. Nishimura was dead, and Saito left his working shoes in the match with Goto. The crowd popped big for the finish, as Saito missed a senton off the top rope and Nagata came back with a koppo kick and an inside cradle. \*1/2

3. Kojima (2) upset Koshinaka (4) to eliminate him from the B block in 10:33. It started out hot with stiff clotheslines back and forth and lots of no sell spots. Koshinaka did a great job carrying the match, since Kojima really doesn't have much of a repertoire outside of a great clothesline and a sloppy moonsault, but he's got an amazing amount of charisma live for someone so relatively young. The match ended up with near falls going back-and-forth and great heat. Koshinaka got near falls with all his signature moves. After a butt bump off the top, Koshinaka went for a power bomb, but Kojima blocked it. Kojima delivered a power bomb of his own for a near fall, but missed a moonsault. Koshinaka then wrapped Kojima up in an inside cradle, but Kojima reversed it and scored the pin--the biggest victory thus far in his career. The place went nuts for this finish, and afterwards Kojima climbed the ropes, and basically did a nestea plunge backwards into the ring, almost as if he fainted in disbelief of scoring such a big win. \*\*\*3/4

4. Sasaki (6) pinned Hashimoto (2) in 9:13. After all the drama Hashimoto provided in previous nights, this match didn't cut it. With both eliminated mathematically, fans were really waiting for Muto vs. Chono. Sasaki's reaction was dead coming out stemming from the Americanized finish to his match with Choshu. And while Hashimoto got an awesome reaction, the tag match the night before played out the knee injury storyline to perfection, and to the crowd, it was like they blew their load in regard to Hashimoto the night before and weren't going to get up for the same thing so quickly. Sasaki opened with a dropkick to the knee and the scorpion. He continued to work on the knee throughout. Hashimoto made brief comebacks but mainly Sasaki dominated, and didn't look that good in doing so. The doctor came out again and teased stopping the match. Sasaki worked over the knee with the prison deathlock. They got up and heated up the crowd by spitting in each other's face and trading ultra stiff blows. However Hashimoto's mobility was gone and Sasaki hit him with a lariat and followed with an ipponzei for the pin. It was a week of a crowd popping for upsets of this type, but this didn't quite cut it. \*3/4

5. Chono (6) beat Muto (4) in 24:43 to win the B block and earn the match with Choshu. They did a fast open teasing their big moves, but then it went to the mat for a long time and even with all the crowd interest, it actually got boring. They picked things up and it was the typical Muto vs. Chono excellent match with the same spots from years past. Muto hit the handspring elbow and facebuster, but then messed up a Frankensteiner off the top as Chono held onto the ropes. Muto then got up and went for a german suplex, but Chono low blowed him and Chono used Muto's own figure four on him. After a rope break, the two traded Yakuza kicks and dropkicks back-and-forth reminiscent of their 1992 G-1 tournament match. Chono got the STF a few times including once on the floor after Muto missed a handspring elbow and hit the guard railing. Muto came back with a windsprint clothesline but Chono caught him with a kick to the face. Chono got back in the ring and Muto had to crawl in on his hands and knees. Muto hit a Frankensteiner for a near fall but missed a moonsault and Chono put on the STF for a long time. The teasing of this submission before the rope break was probably the best job of the entire week and that's saying a lot because that is one spot that was worked often to perfection. Finally Muto hit the dragon screw, hit the moonsault and went for the figure four, but right before he locked it, Chono caught him with a low blow and pinned him with an inside cradle. Fans were throwing their drink cartons like crazy in appreciation for the quality of this match. \*\*\*\*

Inoki came out after this match to the same frenzied reaction he'd been getting doing the same thing in the same spot all week. This time he

mentioned that two years ago he started his final countdown to retirement and joked that, that's been an awful long countdown. He said he had a dream for his final opponent, but it was only a dream. Giant Baba.

6. Fujinami & Kido beat Kimura & Kobayashi in 12:37 when Fujinami gave Kobayashi two Billy Robinson backbreakers and made him submit to the abdominal stretch. Just awful. The fans were laughing about how bad it was which is sad because Fujinami was once the best worker in the business and his character can't do comedy. Missed spots everywhere. -\*

7. Casas & Otani beat Liger & Samurai in 13:19. The crowd was actually kind of dead for this match early even though Casas & Otani looked good carrying things. Casas, whose eye was bandaged up from a cut two days earlier, did a nice tope on Liger. Things picked up from there, although Otani hurt himself during the match as he appeared to be dropped on his shoulder more than his back in receiving a stuff power bomb and was holding his neck the rest of the match and bleeding from the mouth. Casas pinned Samurai with La Magistral. \*\*\*1/4

Liger then was given the house mic. There was a story in the newspaper that morning vaguely saying that Liger may not wrestle for the rest of the year. Liger quickly went over his situation, saying that doctors had discovered a tumor in his brain. He would be undergoing a biopsy to see if it was malignant later in the week, and would have an operation later in the month (8/23 to be exact) to have it removed. If it's benign, he expected to return to the ring. If it's malignant, his career could very well be over, and asked the crowd to pray for him. His music played and he received a thunderous send-off, as fans realized it could be for the last time as an active wrestler.

8. Choshu pinned Chono in 13:45 to win the G-1 tournament. Choshu was fired up coming off the blocks with three Saito suplexes for near falls. Chono then went after Choshu's bad knee. After too many no-sell spots by Choshu to the point he was killing big moves, Chono got the match story going with an STF on the floor. After Chono broke the hold and got in the ring, Choshu laid almost motionless as if he'd passed out from the pain. Fujinami, his most famous rival, who was at ringside cheering him on, slapped Choshu in the face several times to "awaken" him. Chono got him in a half crab in the ring and there was a huge pop when Choshu made the ropes. Chono spit on Fujinami and piledrove Choshu twice but Choshu kicked out. He went back to the STF but Choshu got to the ropes again. Choshu made a comeback with two lariats and a scorpion, but Chono made the ropes. After another lariat, Choshu put the scorpion on in the middle and got the submission. A basic simple psychology match with great heat. It was a good match, but after everything that had taken place during the week, the climax of Choshu's one week story ended up being anti-climactic. \*\*\*1/4

New Japan had announced a press conference in Tokyo at 3 p.m. on 8/7. Choshu said that his left knee was bad and was hurting him the entire week. He said he would be retiring in 1997, although he's announced his retirement before, with his final match being at one of New Japan's scheduled three Dome shows next year. Choshu's final storyline hasn't been completely played out. He's counting on the emotion of his final stand to have a little more shelf life, in particular his final shot at the world title and a final tag team program with Fujinami getting another day in the sun as his partner. While not yet announced publicly, it is believed Hashimoto defending the title against Choshu will headline a 10/6 card at the Tokyo Dome, a building the size of which New Japan never dared to attempt during his and the company's glory days of 1982.

Liger, 31, told the press he had a tumor two centimeters in diameter in his brain. He said he would be going back to his home town in Fukuoka and enter the hospital on 8/21 for a laser operation two days later. He said he had been suffering major headaches since June, to the point at one point during that tour he went to the hospital to find out what was wrong. Before this tour, the doctors found the tumor. He said he fully expected to return to the ring.

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While Inoki was in the senate, he and Shinma got back together and continued creating their illusions. Shinma ran Inoki's senatorial office and the two continued their angles, such as Inoki making a political version of a grandstand play with the government of Iraq, which as it turned out, perfectly coincided with the hostages being released. At one point, Inoki's ego got the better of him and announced he was running for Mayor of Tokyo. When it became obvious he couldn't possibly win, he looked to finally get trapped in a situation with egg on his face. However, a political poll came out among males under 30 in Tokyo, who grew up watching Inoki on prime time television, and, believe it or not, within that one demographic group, Inoki had the most support of all the mayoral candidates. The next day, Inoki dropped out of the race. Being mayor of Tokyo was nice and all, but he had more important things to do, such as working for Peace and Harmony in the world.

But everything while in the senate didn't run smoothly. Shinma claimed he was finally fed up with creating the illusions and storylines and apparently, of Inoki not living in reality. He got Inoki's secretary to come forward with stories of numerous political improprieties and tax evasion. Shinma himself came forward as well with more damaging charges. It was a huge news story for a few weeks and there was plenty of support for Inoki being impeached from the senate and being indicted on serious charges. Of course, Inoki denied all, and no indictments ever resulted. But the story spelled the difference in Inoki receiving a crushing defeat in 1995 when he ran for re-election.

New Japan continued the same training program that has created more Hall of Fame calibre wrestlers over the past two decades than all others combined. Inoki, much as he would have liked to, had his chance with Ali to do something athletically real two decades ago but couldn't pull it off. His hated rival and other prodigal son, Maeda, wanted to do the same thing but was also held back by the fact he, too, was just a pro wrestler, although he's taken wrestling one step closer to reality. Some 17 years after the Ali fiasco, mixed martial arts matches have become something of the rage. And the final generation right out of New Japan's camp, Funaki, has actually become the sports reality that Inoki's fantasy and Maeda's dream were of becoming. But Funaki's comparative success today as compared with Inoki and Maeda in their heyday has also been proof that fantasy is often far more powerful than reality.

The single greatest angle in the history of wrestling took place in September of 1995--the New Japan vs. UWFJ feud which led to the Muto vs. Takada match. By this time, the man who specialized in the concept, Inoki, had almost nothing to do with New Japan's business and is basically a figurehead brought before the fans on big shows. It's the Choshu show and his biggest angle resulted in an unprecedented three Tokyo Dome sellouts over a seven month period and more than \$20 million in live revenue (gates plus concessions) over the three shows including the biggest money live show of all-time.

It was the same old trick. Create a promotion vs. promotion feud and put together a match that fans believe because the stakes are so unbelievably high, that fans believe nobody will do the job and they actually believe they're going to see something real. Whether it was Inoki vs. Kobayashi, Inoki vs. Raska, Inoki vs. Kimura, Inoki vs. Chochyashivili or the elusive Inoki vs. Maeda or the biggest one ever--Muto vs. Takada, the story is basically the same, the characters are just updated.

## THE READERS PAGES

### 8/14 ISSUE

Congratulations on the 8/14 issue of the Observer. This may be the best one ever. It seems every time you go to Japan, you come back with a killer issue jam packed with history and inside information. First request. Go to Japan more often.

If readers were interested in your history of the New Japan promotion, they would do well to obtain two valuable pieces of history which will allow them to see many of the matches you described. The first is the Antonio Inoki 30th anniversary memorial laser disc set issued about four years ago. It contains the complete versions of 12 of his most famous matches including those you talked about against Dory Funk Jr., Johnny Powers, Shozo Kobayashi, Kintaro Oki, Lou Thesz, Tiger Jeet Singh, Jack Brisco and Billy Robinson. Valis has a multi-volume set called "History of the IWGP title" which gives a fairly complete history of New Japan's most prestigious title belt.

Reading the issue brings me two more requests. Please someday do similar issues on both All Japan and the All Japan womens office. It would be wonderful if you would write a complete history of Japanese wrestling or at least a modern version of your 1986 "Who's Who in Wrestling" book.

Were there ever any singles matches between Antonio Inoki and Giant Baba when they were rookies? What do you think are the chances that the two will ever oppose each other even under limited conditions as a ten minute exhibition?

Chris Zavisa  
Plymouth, Michigan

**DM: Baba and Inoki wrestled several times in the first year or two of their careers, with Baba winning every time. Right now I'd say the odds of them meeting are slim, but you can never tell about the future**

I recently had the chance to compare the Lou Thesz book "Hooker" with the Japanese translation edition by Koji Miyamoto and the difference was shockingly large. Although the Japanese hard-cover fancy book contained 200 photos and was sold nationally through Baseball Magazine Sha as opposed to the mail-order process of the American book, the Japanese book completely omitted any kayfabe information and was written as an autobiography of a hero called "The Iron Man."

I can't say that it was bad, since the Japanese appreciate pro wrestling living legends more than Americans and circulation figures are everything in that industry. Because the book sold to the general public, the publisher decided to keep the myth and fantasy about Lou Thesz and pro wrestling. The final outcome is there are two very different autobiographies of the same person. But I was deeply moved by the historical facts one could only learn from the English version and I speak very highly of that book. It was another example of Weekly Pro Wrestling style which is heavily edited and skewed print journalism.

I found a letter in the readers page saying that Tarzan Yamamoto should have covered New Japan shows from paid seats and not doing so was his mistake. However, Weekly Pro has never been true journalism. It's a double structural illusion derived from pro wrestling. It's part shoot journalism of course, and even includes worked-shoot print angles, but it is still the magazine fantasy that we all love, so it would have been foolish for it to report on New Japan matches at that time.

I know that many Observer readers subscribe to Weekly Pro only for the photos and I would rate it as the world's finest photo journalism wrestling magazine. It's worth paying more than \$10 each week to get it in the United States. But as evident in the Lou Thesz book, you may be aware that in essence it is still the same as a Bill Apter magazine. I have nothing against that. As with being in the ring, customers and readers have a right to choose and pay for what they want and pro wrestling is a work business. Some people prefer Atsushi Onita's theatrical wed drama. Others enjoy shootfighting. I personally enjoy Lucha Libre. The problem in Japan is that there is no Observer or 900 lines and that's why Yamamoto's last word was that "journalism was dead."

The only true wrestling journalism in Japanese was probably my own book, "Worldwide Pro Wrestling," published in 1995 by Shuei-sha. Shuei-sha is the nation's top publisher and it's rare that the giant Random House type firm published a pro wrestling book for the mass market. The reason I bring my own book up is that when I read "Hooker," it was as if I was reading my own book in English, especially the first chapter was amazingly similar to a chapter in my book. I was so happy since the biggest legend in pro wrestling explained this bizarre world in the same way I did.

The 8/14 Observer was your masterpiece issue and it's my regret that many Japanese fans have not yet discovered it. As a native who grew up watching Antonio Inoki, the article shows the realization of the international video age. Regardless of nationality or where you currently live, wrestling fans share many of the same values of this universal industry.

I'd like to bring up two matches in detail since I felt it made sense for readers.

The first was the Muhammad Ali vs. Antonio Inoki match on June 26, 1976. Although you stated it ended up as a shoot, I believe the time limit draw decision was predetermined. But it was not a worked match. They never rehearsed anything or discussed doing high spots. My belief comes from reading Hisashi Shinma's book called "Good-bye Antonio Inoki" (1993). The manager of Inoki for 26 years never stated this in print, but there were hints if you read between the lines. He wrote it as if the draw ending was the provision that allowed New Japan to not pay Ali the \$6.1 million. The \$1.8 million had already been paid in advance before Ali had arrived in Tokyo. Remember at that time the exchange rate for \$1 was 300 yen, and money figures of this type were simply unheard of in Japan for any form of show business.

No matter what happened before hand, it was still something of a shoot match and it's the right thing to compare it to the Dan Severn vs. Ken Shamrock match. I found the same strained atmosphere in that match. What happened was beyond both fighters' wildest imaginations or game plans, as they fought a very serious fight with enormous fear of the skills of the other. Ali himself admitted that the match with Inoki was a very fearful experience. I firmly believe had there never been an Ali-Inoki match, there would have been no UWF, Rings, Pancrase or even UFC today.

It's interesting to note that in the 20th anniversary Ali-Inoki book published by Weekly Gong, the editor stuck to his beliefs that the match was a shoot and that's why it was so boring for the general public. While I didn't learn anything new from that book, it's great that Japanese are always trying to learn from the past and that new wrestling fans are learning important history from buying that book.

Karl Gotch, who taught the art of hooking to Yoshiaki Fujiwara and many others, seconded Inoki in the match with Ali. He was interviewed in the book and talked about Pancrase, his ideal pro wrestling promotion. While he praised Masakatsu Funaki and Minoru Suzuki, his last two true students, he questioned why the Shamrock brothers were pushed in Pancrase since he sees them as streetfighters and not wrestlers. He's sure never changed after all these years.

Although Inoki lost a lot of his reputation with the public and well as experienced a financial debt from the Ali match, he learned an important lesson which made him a strong leader of the innovative venture capital business known as New Japan Pro Wrestling. That leadership later led to him earning a Senatorial seat for one term, so pro wrestling historians need to focus more on the importance of that one night in Budokan.

Inoki took the blame for the poor match, but there was a difference from the Shamrock-Severn UFC match since Inoki was both the wrestler in the match and the promoter of the match. Unlike the Vince McMahon-Hulk Hogan relationship, Shinma, a real-life religionist was a business and artistic manager so Inoki's burden as a top star was much bigger than that of Shawn Michaels today.

Everyone liked seeing Ali at the Atlanta Olympics. I'd like to mention that Inoki was the only opponent of Ali who kept in contact with him. Over the last few years, they appeared together in Peace and Harmony related events in Cuba, Los Angeles, North Korea and Tokyo. It is well-known that Ali learned his showmanship that made him the world's most famous athlete by growing up watching Gorgeous George and Fred Blassie. However, it was Inoki who made him respect pro wrestling as a sport.

The other match I'd like to talk about was the Hulk Hogan vs. Inoki match on June 2, 1983. Your writing might give the impression that an accident happened during the match, but it was actually a work. It was a Hisashi Shinma super angle which fooled everyone, long before Brian Pillman-Kevin Sullivan took place and the impact was huge. A famous example was that many young Japanese including 15-year-old Minoru Suzuki decided to become pro wrestlers after watching that match in order to gain revenge on Hogan for their hero.

The most amazing fact was that all of the national media, network television news and newspapers blindly bought the angle. The media that didn't cover pro wrestling reported Inoki going to the hospital and legitimate major news. Naturally after finding out the truth, the media bashed pro wrestling as fake so Shinma's absolute peak as booker actually ended up hurting the industry.

While things didn't take place as planned, it was an angle to explain the physical decline of Inoki. Most agree that Inoki's peak as an athlete was 1974-75 and by this point in time, Inoki suffered from a serious case of diabetes. He was unable to wrestle for three months, but not because of an incident in that match but from diabetes and other related illnesses. Where New Japan is distinguished as different from WWF and WCW is the concept of athletic credibility. Although the IWGP tournament was Inoki's baby, because of his illness, the booking committee gave the chance to a young and powerful Hogan.

Neither the AWA nor the WWF created Hogan. Japanese fans first discovered his enormous potential as a star and 1983 was during his athletic prime. It's sad that most Americans saw Hogan after 1984. Vince McMahon's brilliant marketing idea was simply a theft, using what had already happened within New Japan as his own market research plan.

The last thing I'd like to mention wasn't a wrestling match, but something that happened on October 14, 1989. While Senator Inoki was delivering a speech at a political meeting, a thug assaulted him with a knife and Inoki was bloodied. All the television and newspapers covered it as a major news story and nothing different has ever been revealed today. But I wasn't the only one who smelled an angle. I'm not surprised by anything that happens within the wrestling world, but I was scared when I saw the television coverage all over the place. I believe that was the point when Shinma recognized Inoki wasn't living in reality. When Shinma learned that Inoki made a secret deal to offset his big debt in exchange for dropping out of the race to be Mayor of Tokyo, Shinma went public. It was Shinma's mercy is not revealing everything that may have kept Inoki out of jail and enabled him to finish his Senatorial term.

This year is the fifth anniversary of Riki Choshu being the Executive Booker of New Japan Pro Wrestling. At the fifth G-1 tournament, he finally put himself over. But as a long time New Japan follower, I never liked his way of thinking including his views of wrestling journalism and I know I'm not the only one with that feeling among the generation that watched the Ali-Inoki match live on television.

Choshu made a famous remark saying that Tarzan Yamamoto is the UWF concept itself. It was funny that the man in charge of New Japan admitted that the UWF movement was not created by Akira Maeda or Nobuhiko Takada, but manipulated by the editor of a wrestling magazine. He recognized Yamamoto as not only his biggest enemy but his main rival as being the most influential person in the pro wrestling industry.

As a wrestling booker, it is impossible to satisfy all the different types of wrestling audiences at the same time. However, Keiichi Yamada is the

rare exception so he is the best booker in the world in the New Japan junior heavyweight division. If one is running a major league promotion, they need to target the marks, smarks and smart fans combination. Choshu focused too much on what smarks think through reading too much Weekly Pro. I believe that's the real problem with the pro wrestling scene in Japan today.

Live attendance is record breaking and magazine readership is high, but that's all within the pro wrestling village. In the real world outside the village, weekly television ratings air in the late night time slot and ratings are low. The turnover rate among wrestling fans has shortened because they don't promote in a way to cultivate long-time fans. Many pro wrestling insiders were happy to see Yamamoto go, but I hope Choshu ends up being punished as well. Otherwise, many will point to the peaking of the New Japan empire very soon.

Tadashi Tanaka  
New York, New York

**DM: Over the years I've talked with a lot of people regarding the Ali-Inoki and I'm pretty sure the story in the 8/14 issue was accurate as I heard basically the same story from several insiders to the match over the years. Independently, in the Ali biography by Thomas Hauser, which is an excellent and extremely accurate book, the story of Ali-Inoki was related the same way. I've heard many different version of the Hogan-Inoki match story including the one mentioned. The key point whether or not it was a planned finish of that match or not, is that the post-match changed the face of wrestling in Japan and the screwed up finish in the rematch one year later only made a bad situation worse.**

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With no major shows this past week, largely due to the UFC cancellation, we're going to look at what can be argued is the best wrestling promotion in the world today, and probably the second most successful, New Japan Pro Wrestling.

New Japan, in its 40th year of operations, was at times, like the late 70s, the early 80s and the mid-90s, probably the leading pro wrestling company in the world. But there were always the limitations of being based in Japan. Before 1984, it was a positive for a number of reasons. Unlike the U.S. groups, they were a national company, and they had network prime time coverage, and got paid by their television station, TV-Asahi, for the rights to the footage. Almost all the company's historical footage still exists and is valuable today in the more fragmented television world where there is value in sports classics.

But unlike WWE, and even TNA, who have been able to export their tapes and tour overseas, New Japan, while having run shows in many parts of the world at its peak, was never able to sustain high levels of popularity outside its country.

New Japan started in 1972 during a tumultuous period in Japanese pro wrestling history, with four different promotions. The JWP, or JWA as it was also called, was the monopoly promotion in Japan for most of the period from its inception in 1954, behind the popularity of legitimate national hero Rikidozan, until facing several different opposition groups that they crushed during the 60s. But the JWP lost its prominence when its two biggest stars, Shohei "Giant" Baba, and tag team partner Kanji "Antonio" Inoki, left in 1971 and 1972.

Baba got the backing of the National Wrestling Alliance after striking a deal with Dory Funk Sr., giving him access to much of the top U.S. talent, which in those days were key to drawing. He had great relations with the biggest stars in the world, which enabled him to put together some amazing early tours, including a cast of Hall of Famers for his tournament to crown the PWF heavyweight title. Even before All Japan and New Japan, there was a secondary group in existence already, International Wrestling Enterprises, headed by Isao Yoshihara, which had business relationships in Europe, where they made Billy Robinson into a sensation and were the first company to use Andre the Giant,

then Monster Roussimoff. Later, they garnered a working agreement with Verne Gagne for AWA talent for several years, although Gagne later switched his allegiance to All Japan, which played a part in why Hulk Hogan, a New Japan wrestler, never got the AWA title.

New Japan, when starting out, used Karl Gotch as its top foreigner. In its early years, the company had to create its own foreign stars, like Johnny Powers, Killer Karl Krupp and its biggest heel star of the mid-70s, Tiger Jeet Singh, while All Japan had access to ready made stars that had been coming to Japan on top for years, or were established as superstars in the magazines.

Eventually, in 1976, New Japan was able to get into the National Wrestling Alliance largely by working with promoters like Vincent James McMahon (the father of the current Vince McMahon), Eddie Gossett (Eddie Graham) in Florida, Mike LeBell in Los Angeles and Francisco Flores in Mexico. While All Japan concentrated on major American stars, New Japan had a wider variety of foreigners, notably lighter weight stars from Mexico, and in the late 70s, when pushing Tatsumi Fujinami, became the first Japanese promotion to use junior heavyweights strongly. They also got California wrestlers booked by LeBell and WWWF talent booked by McMahon. That had its own issues until 1977, as McMahon's champion was Bruno Sammartino, who was friends with Baba, and Sammartino, no matter how much McMahon pushed him, refused to work for Inoki. But once Superstar Billy Graham and later Bob Backlund held the title, Inoki used the WWWF title as on par with his own NWF title. The NWF was an American world title from Pedro Martinez's promotion in the Buffalo/Cleveland area that Inoki purchased so New Japan could have its own world title. After 1976, it was no longer called world but just NWF, as a provision for being allowed into the NWA. The NWF title was dropped when the IWGP tournament was first announced, to crown the best of the world champions. Hulk Hogan beat Inoki to become the first IWGP champion, then won the WWF title.

By the early 80s, they were the top wrestling promotion in the world until they had a mutiny in late 1983 when a number of the top stars left the company for a variety of reasons, financial and otherwise. Stars like Andre the Giant, Stan Hansen, Hogan, Dick Murdoch, Adrian Adonis, Masked Superstar, Canek and others worked several months a year in Japan. While smaller wrestlers had been stars in the U.K. and Mexico, it was really New Japan that took them to the next level in the early 80s, behind the original Tiger Mask (Satoru Sayama), and his matches with the likes of Dynamite Kid, Black Tiger (Rollerball Mark Rocco), Bret Hart, Kuniaki Kobayashi, Perro Aguayo, Gran Hamada and Steve Wright. They also had strong Japanese vs. Japanese feuds, most notably Inoki vs. Rusher Kimura (the top star of the IWE, which went out of business in 1981) and Fujinami vs. Riki Choshu.

At various times in 1983, the company's most promising young stars like Akira Maeda and Nobuhiko Takada, who ended up as legends elsewhere, Riki Choshu and his entire group (who left for All Japan but came back a few years later), and the original Tiger Mask, a kids super hero, all left. Hisashi Shinma, who booked the company during its glory years and was Inoki's personal manager, formed his own promotion, the UWF, with Maeda, Takada and Yoshiaki Fujiwara. He lost the promotion when Satoru Sayama, the original Tiger Mask, joined, but would only do so if Shinma was out and the company felt Sayama at the time was more valuable, although the promotion closed. At one point Inoki was about to join the UWF, which could have killed New Japan, because Inoki was so valuable they would have had a good shot at losing their television deal and they'd be in bad shape. But at the time, the key in saving the company was Tatsumi Fujinami's decision to stay. Inoki & Fujinami were the top stars in rebuilding the company. Maeda, Takada and Fujiwara came back and did big business against them, although left again. Choshu and almost all of his main wrestlers, with the exception of Yoshiaki Yatsu, returned a few years later. By 1988, with the opening of the Tokyo Dome, New Japan was able to draw 50,000 fans to its biggest shows. While the New Japan of the 90s didn't have the mainstream appeal of the 1976-83 period, as things modernized, the business itself was actually far more successful. But even then, people were talking about cracks in the foundation.

Those who had been around noted that with television no longer in prime time, the number of actual wrestling fans was way down, even if big events drew better than ever, and in the long run, that would lead to a decline.

The peak period was when aging stars like Inoki, Fujinami and Choshu were mixed in with a new generation of stars, most notably Shinya Hashimoto, Masahiro Chono, Keiji Muto, Hiroshi Hase and Kensuke Sasaki. Big shows moved from Sumo Hall, which held 11,000, to the Tokyo Dome, which would sell out frequently with more than 50,000 fans.

But there was another aspect of New Japan, which was using outsiders in pro wrestling. In the mid-70s, Inoki surpassed Baba and New Japan surpassed All Japan because of variety in promoting. Instead of just using pro wrestlers, they would create characters, sometimes legit as far as competitive fighting, sometimes not, bill them from other fighting sports and have them face, and lose to Inoki, in mixed style matches. Among those famous opponents were judo Olympic gold medalist Willem Ruska, karate champion Willie Williams, and boxers Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner. Because of this, Inoki was able to craft himself as a legendary real fighter, as opposed to just being a pro wrestling champion who almost never lost.

It was that side plot that often did big business for the company, even if the matches themselves in most cases were awful. Still, there is a generation of Japanese who grew up remembering Inoki's poorly worked matches against the non-pro wrestlers as far bigger events, closer to how the public in the U.S. remembers classic boxing from the 70s, than his biggest and best pro wrestling matches.

The idea Inoki tried to foster was, whether you believed pro wrestling was real or not, that New Japan Pro Wrestling featured the finest conditioned athletes and fighters, and in a mixed rules fight could beat fighters from other disciplines. Not everyone was pushed as a shooter, but the idea was they all trained for it and could handle themselves if necessary. That toughest mentality is why Hashimoto headlined more Tokyo Domes in the heyday than Muto or Chono. That helped draw big business for matches against people from other sports or wrestlers from other companies. And it can't be denied, although some like to, that for the short-term, it wasn't effective both culturally and business-wise. It also can't be denied that it was a short-term thing that needed to be done infrequently, and they did far too much of it when it was no longer working. But it ended up creating problems, in particular Hashimoto got embarrassed in a feud against Olympic judo silver medalist Naoya Ogawa. While their confrontations were great television spectacles, some of the most remembered bouts of their era, it was a blow Hashimoto never recovered from, and eventually left the promotion.

A few years later, when Yuji Nagata had become the top star of the promotion, he was put in a New Year's Eve shoot match against Mirko Cro Cop, a kickboxer who it was figured had no ground game. Nagata had been an Olympic hopeful in wrestling and the feeling was wrestlers beat kickboxers in a shoot by taking them down and finishing them there. It had been shown in MMA competition, and Cro Cop was a big K-1 name at the time, although not nearly as big a name as he was going to become.

However, Nagata by that point had not competed in wrestling in a decade, and only had a few weeks of MMA training. Cro Cop had trained takedown defense, and knocked Nagata out quickly. The idea from the Inoki era that the New Japan wrestlers were the toughest real fighters took a blow, especially since Nagata, with his amateur background, was always pushed as a shooter in New Japan and the kind of tough guy who could also work and could help carry the company. Inoki, who was still in charge of the company, recruited a number of MMA fighters over the years. While Don Frye was a huge success, and Naoya Ogawa became a major star, it was one of those deals with diminishing returns and they didn't know when to stop. You see the IWGP title held by Tadao Yasuda, who got a push as a pro wrestler because he got a sloppy MMA win over Jerome LeBanner on the card Nagata was embarrassed in, as well as Kazuyuki Fujita and Bob Sapp winning it. Fujita started as a New Japan wrestler and did

well in MMA, but was lacking the charisma to be a world champion pro wrestler.

Sapp had the charisma, but wasn't good in the ring. Plus, Fujita and Sapp both vacated the title (with Sapp it wasn't bad since he lost to Fujita in MMA, and Fujita beat Tanahashi for the vacant title), as did Brock Lesnar over a contract dispute. Shinsuke Nakamura, after doing decently well before losing to Daniel Gracie by a second round submission in his first MMA fight, was then given a huge push including the IWGP title in 2003, long before he was ready, although Nakamura did develop into a legit major star. By the time Inoki sold the company in 2005, it was in shambles.

In recent years, the company has started what appears to be a comeback with a new younger fan base. You can't try and overstate it too much, as the fact Yukes sold the company earlier this year to Bushiroad, a game card maker, for \$6.55 million, tells you the condition of the company. When you compare that to the \$1.25 billion UFC was worth when they sold 10% for \$125 million. The \$655.5 million WWE was worth at press time tells you just how far away New Japan really is from being the leading pro wrestling company in the world, as it's not even 10% but 1% of its net worth based on stock and sale price. New Japan revenues are probably 10% of WWE and if the WWE owners all wanted to sell, the price would plummet from that number so 1% isn't exactly accurate, but it does make an accurate point of just how far New Japan is from the two big worldwide companies.

The Carters have turned down far larger offers for TNA, and New Japan is hardly the money pit TNA has been, and still, like the TV show where the Tanahashi vs. Okada match showed, has the ability to ratings TNA and WWE would die for, but it's a different market. Watching New Japan with its sellout crowds for PPV shows and aura of a number of superstars makes it appear far more major league than TNA, and produce better major shows than WWE. But that sale is a reality check that the promotion has a long way to go, perhaps because of the feeling in Japan that pro wrestling was something that used to be big in a different generation and now just exists on a small level.

In many ways, New Japan is a strange world, definitely major league, but nothing like it once was. If you watch the promotion, Hiroshi Tanahashi in particular comes across as not just a superstar, but as big as any star in modern wrestling. But the general public in Japan, very familiar with a lot of wrestlers, doesn't even know who he is. Wrestling was mainstream in another era, one of the top five sports in the country. Today it's fringe, but does have a rabid but small fan base. New Japan has a 30 minute show on TV-Asahi, a major network, at about 2:30 a.m. on Saturday, but also has longer versions of the show on BS-Asahi, a Broadcast Satellite channel that virtually everyone in the country gets.

Their PPVs are on a CS format, which costs about 1,200 yen (about \$15.36) per month just to get the service. About 5 million homes in Japan, or roughly 10% of the population, is hooked up. So unlike the U.S., where a PPV show can be viewed in about 85% of the U.S. homes, in Japan it's a fraction, making PPV not a major revenue stream. New Japan also has TV on Samurai!, a 24 hour wrestling and MMA channel; a first run show on TV-Asahi's CS format channel; New Japan Classics on J Sports; and Sky A has New Japan Legend, airing matches from the 70s, 80s and 90s.

New Japan also heavily utilizes You Tube, Facebook, twitter, mixi (another form of social media in Japan), as promotional vehicles. Their fan base doesn't read the magazines, a fixture with the old fan base, nor Tokyo Sports, a fixture of working people coming home on the trains to keep up with sports like wrestling.

The good is that this allows them to cultivate the existing following. But it's hard to make new fans in any significant numbers without a strong television outlet. But that may be a thing of the past for everyone in Japan at this point.

The strength of the promotion is the mix of talent. The top star, current IWGP heavyweight champion Tanahashi, is probably the best in-ring



all-around talent in the business. The guy has it all, the look, the charisma, the incredible working ability and not just athletically, but his ability to understand when to do what is equal to anyone in wrestling. He also has the aura of being a real world champion who can both look and play the part. Earlier in his career, his being a small heavyweight and a pretty boy type helped and hurt. It helped in that he could get sympathy, and he was always popular with women, but guys didn't warm up to him as quickly. That's changed over the years, and he can project at a world champion level.

His two major rivals are Tetsuya Naito, who in a lot of ways is a younger version of himself, and Kazuchika Okada, the top heel. No promotion in the world has done a better job with a new wrestler than New Japan with Okada. He returned from TNA, where he did nothing, on the Jan. 4 Tokyo Dome show with the plan of making him a top star by making him world champion. WWE has tried the same thing, with mixed results. At first Okada stumbled, with his playboy character seeming not to fit. But he came a long way in a short period of time, a lot because of working against Tanahashi and Naito, as well as Hirooki Goto.

But everyone has their own distinct character and working style. When it comes to the world title, they are loaded with guys who can step in as revolving challengers from the regulars. Nagata is the older former champion, but is still among the best workers in the world. While it probably took him a couple of years to shake the Cro Cop loss, this fan base now doesn't even know that existed, and probably wouldn't care. He's now the great worker in the mid-card who can hang with and beat anyone in the main event, with his believable style, great facials and fire. Minoru Suzuki, one of the Pancrase originators, is a charismatic heel who plays the arrogant shooter who looks like he's being uncooperative in his matches. That creates this idea he's a heel asshole going against the grain when it's actually his working style that clicks. Togi Makabe is the brawler, whose chain, entrance music and big moves like the kneedrop, were taken from the late Bruiser Brody. Goto is a guy who has won the big tournaments, and beaten everyone at one time or another, but never wins the real big one. Nakamura was Tanahashi's career rival, who at one point was groomed to be the top star of the company because he was bigger and had the strong background as a college wrestling star. But he was only so-so in the ring and had below average charisma. He's remade himself with a new character and can always headline and do well if needed, perhaps like the Carolinas Greg Valentine to Tanahashi's Ric Flair. There's even Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan, a legendary team from a decade earlier, who are both no longer top singles guys due to injuries, but are very effective as the "house" tag team.

Then there is the junior heavyweight division. The big star is actually a full-time foreigner, Fergal "Prince" Devitt, who is also one of the best workers in the business. But it's filled with talented foreigners like Low Ki, Alex Koslov and Rocky Romero, and perhaps Alex Shelley joining the ranks. There are also Luchadors from CMLL, which works closely with New Japan, like Angel de Oro, who have gotten a following. And there are the veterans like Jushin Liger, still a legend at 47 years old who is the guy who used to have the fireball fastball and remade himself and kept his career strong with a knuckleball when his heat died down. There is also Tiger Mask, who, if nothing else, is the continuation of a gimmick that has been part of the junior heavyweight division on-and-off for 31 years.

There is a weakness in the foreign department. By going to the finals of the G-1 tournament, Karl Anderson (Chad Allegra), who had a back-and-forth program with Nakamura and beat Tanahashi to get to the finals, is positioned as the top foreign star. Anderson is a very good worker who has been a regular here so long that he had adapted to the style. For years he was the junior member of the Bad Intentions tag team with Giant Bernard. Other foreign heavyweight regulars include MVP, who they pushed as Intercontinental champion, and Lance Archer, while Shelton Benjamin has worked some, including G-1. Archer is learning the style and fits what has traditionally worked in Japan with the tall powerful heel, the role that dates back to the Sharpe Brothers in the 50s. A good wrestler with that size who can handle Japan is hard to find. The changes in the U.S. business as well as the Japanese business make it impossible they will ever have the kind of foreign roster they've had in the past. Benjamin can still impress with athletic ability, and is still missing some in charisma. He probably could

do well in the right tag team situation but I don't see him as a main event single. Anderson should probably be getting an IWGP title shot at a smaller arena in the next few months, which would be the biggest singles match of his career.

Since the full show just surfaced, I'm going to look at the 6/16 event from Osaka, a PPV show where Tanahashi regained the title from Okada in what was (along with Davey Richards vs. Michael Elgin and Okada vs. Naito) one of the three best matches I've seen this year. It was a show that featured an assortment of very different matches and personalities. The wider variety of styles made the long show more entertaining to me, even without the promos and Japanese commentary, than even the better WWE, TNA or ROH shows. It's more major league than ROH, and the characters have main event charisma. The variety of styles makes for a less redundant show than a WWE show can be at times. Certainly in WWE you could never have the juniors the way New Japan does it, or the Suzuki type, and even Makabe style. But here's the show:

1. Kota Ibushi & Kenny Omega & Daisuke Sasaki beat Prince Devitt & Kushida & Bushi in 10:48. This was Team DDT vs. Team New Japan and for business reasons, the right thing to do was put Team DDT over, so they did, as Ibushi pinned Bushi clean with a power bomb. The key is Ibushi was being built up for an IWGP jr. title match against Low Ki (that he ended up winning). Highlights included Bushi doing a plancha into a huracanrana on the floor on Omega, Team DDT doing a crazy triple dive spot which included Omega & Ibushi both doing moonsaults off the top rope to the floor. Team New Japan also did a triple dive spot with Devitt & Kushida doing running flip dives to opposite sides of the ring. Devitt did a double foot stomp on Omega and Sasaki saved. Ibushi did sky twister on Bushi. Bushi did a Spanish fly on Ibushi and Sasaki saved again. Fun opener. They did more than enough to make it entertaining, had the right result for where they were going next, but didn't go so balls out that nobody could follow them, and these guys are good enough to do that. \*\*\*½

2. Rocky Romero & Tomohiro Ishii & Yoshi-Hashi beat Yuji Nagata & Wataru Inoue & Captain New Japan in 9:26. Romero is a hard working prelim action guy. Ishii is an older heel playing tough guy and Yoshi-Hashi is a younger guy on the way up. Captain New Japan is Mitsuhide Hirasawa, who has also wrestled as Hideo Saito as a heel. He's the resident comedy figure, being Captain America comic book guy except with the New Japan insignia. He reminds me of Santino Marella or when Eric Young was Super Eric. There was an awesome opening exchange with Nagata and Ishii going back-and-forth that the crowd went wild for. First they threw elbows back-and-forth and played tough guy, then slapped the hell out of each other. The story was that Captain kept wanting to tag in, but Nagata & Inoue would tag each other in while Captain had his arm out and kept getting mad. He was the guy who kept wanting the basketball passed to him, except he's the weakest shooter on the team. Finally Captain tagged in, and he got some offense including a Rock bottom. The finish saw Captain hold Ishii and Nagata went for a running kick, but Ishii moved and Nagata kicked Captain. Ishii then gave Captain a lariat and brainbuster for the pin. Captain and Nagata had words after. Nagata and Ishii went back-and-forth after the match was over. They were the ones who really made the match even though the comedy storyline was a big part of it. \*\*\*1/4

3. Tiger Mask & Jushin Liger won the vacant IWGP jr. tag titles from Taka Michinoku & Taichi in 9:20. These guys don't do much high flying like Devitt & Ryusuke Taguchi did when they dominated the belts. Liger came out in his giant icicle outfit. At one point Taichi gave Liger a low blow and Michinoku counted the fall. Needless to say the ref wasn't buying that. In the middle of the match, Taichi took off his pants. He had normal wrestling trunks underneath. Taichi has a cool star look to him and Michinoku is a good experienced jr. heel. Liger is a legend and the people react to him like that. Tiger Mask is just there. He's fine. It's a great gimmick. He's not great but does, or at least did, enough of the old Sayama moves that he's kind of what I'd call weak 80s nostalgia, but works as Liger's tag team partner because it's the remake of the first masked jr. legend teaming with the older version of the second. As soon as Taichi took off his pants, Liger gave him a brainbuster and hot tagged to Tiger Mask. Michinoku and Taichi threw Tiger Mask into the ref, who went down. They did a double superkick on Tiger Mask and a stuff emerald frosien on him but no ref to count.

Taichi hit Liger with chair shots to the chest and back. They were clearly avoiding chairs anywhere near the head, which is good. Taichi then tore one of the white horns off the icicle mask, put it on his crotch, and then acted like he was beating himself off. Then he tore off the other horn and ripped open the mask. Liger had his face painted underneath. Taichi went for a chair but Liger blew red mist in both Michinoku and Taichi's faces. So Taichi now looked like Heath Slater. Liger pulled out a spike and tried to kill Taichi, who moved as Liger charged and the charging Liger trying to kill Taichi ended up sticking the spike through a table set up in the corner. Liger power bombed Taichi through the table. He then threw the broken table at Michinoku. Tiger Mask then did a missile dropkick, and a backwards somersault kneedrop on Michinoku before pinning him after a Tiger suplex. After the match, Tiger found himself a red traditional Liger mask. They paused, teased to the crowd, and Liger took off the icicle mask and put on the old red Liger mask. The crowd cheered this pretty wildly as his music played. As you can tell, a lot of shortcuts but it told its story and it was good match. \*\*\*

4. Shelton Benjamin & MVP beat Tama Tonga & Karl Anderson in 10:19. Not much heat for this but the wrestling was solid, and good at points. Anderson got a near fall with a running power bomb on MVP, and he also came off the top rope with a gun stun (diamond cutter) on MVP for a near fall. Tonga, who wears Snuka trunks and has Snuka hair, tagged in and did his legends imitation offense. First came the Toyota roll, followed by the Snuka double leapfrog and chop on Benjamin. Then he did the "Who!" like Flair and the Brody bark, followed by a Stinger splash and a Mil Mascaras crossbody off the top. The finish saw MVP hit Anderson with a plancha, while Tonga was on the top rope, likely trying to do the Snuka splash on Benjamin. Benjamin popped up, did that running leap to the top rope and immediately gave Tonga a belly-to-belly superplex two-thirds of the way across the ring, and then hit the paydirt for the pin. \*\*\*3/4

5. Low Ki pinned Ryusuke Taguchi to retain the IWGP jr. title in 12:32. Taguchi did a running flip dive early. Most of the match after that was Low Ki working on Taguchi's left knee. At one point he had Taguchi upside down in the corner (tree of woe) and Low Ki was hammering down the 12-to-6 bionic elbows at the knee. He used the Ki Krusher for a near fall. Taguchi came back and at one point went for a Tiger suplex, but Low Ki escaped and did a double foot stomp onto Taguchi's left knee. Really cool sequence. Low Ki went for the sharpshooter. Crowd was real hot because Low Ki did this in a previous match with Devitt. Taguchi made the ropes. The finish saw Taguchi upside down in the tree of woe position and Low Ki gave him a double foot stomp off the top for the pin. They didn't have the time to steal the show but did a well worked match. Ibushi then came out for the challenge for the next shot. Ibushi spoke in broken English saying, slowly, "I want this belt. This belt is mine. Next champion is me." Low Ki responded tearing the house down talking smoothly in fluent Japanese accepting the challenge. For whatever people want to say about Low Ki, give him credit for learning the language and the ability to not just understand and speak it well enough to order meals, but well enough to cut promos before thousands of people. \*\*\*1/4

6. Toru Yano & Takashi Iizuka retained the IWGP tag titles (which they've since lost) against Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan in a no contest. The match was all wild brawling with good heat. At first, Yano & Iizuka attacked TV announcer Nogami, and Kojima & Tenzan came out for the save. All four were brawling in the crowd and it was a double count out in 2:41. Kojima & Tenzan wanted a restart and president Naoki Sugabayashi okayed it. They continued to brawl outside. Yano & Iizuka were delivering chair shots to the back. They went back and forth. The heels undid turnbuckle padding and Kojima was thrown into it for a near fall. Kojima & Tenzan came back with 3-Ds on both guys. Iizuka threw down the ref. Iizuka brought in a chair but Kojima got it. Iizuka then rammed the ref's head into the chair. Iizuka gave Kojima a low blow and put on the iron fingers (his trademark foreign object, like Brass Knux but instead of for a punch, for a karate thrust). But Tenzan nailed Iizuka in the back with a chair. Yano hit Tenzan with a chair and took him out. Tenzan and Yano then were doing a dueling chair spot before the ref got up and threw it out at 12:26. Crowd wasn't happy at all about the finish. This match wouldn't have been good if there were two matches on the same show like it, but given the feud and the story the match played it was fine. \*\*\*

7. Shinsuke Nakamura & Masato Tanaka beat Tetsuya Naito & Hirooki Goto in 13:28. This is just the top guys who are kind of odd men out on the card, where the winner of the fall is likely getting a title shot. Tanaka is way smaller than in his ECW days, but still a hell of a worker, really amazing given all the punishment he took and it's a dozen years later how good he still is. He's really a junior heavyweight who works believably like a heavyweight. Goto tried his shoten kai (Matt Morgan's hellevator) but Nakamura gave him a knee to the head. Nakamura's gimmick is he's wacked out of his mind. Naito hot tagged in until being cut off. He's really smooth in his comeback. Naito jumped off Goto's back with a dropkick to Tanaka. Naito hit the German suplex but Nakamura saved. Naito did an abdominal stretch slam and went up for the sky twister. Tanaka blocked and power bombed him out of the corner, did a sick running clothesline and a brainbuster but Goto saved. Tanaka gave Naito a sliding D (kind of a slide on your butt into a clothesline on a downed opponent) for a near fall. He tried a second sliding D. Naito did a front rolling cradle and Nakamura saved. Tanaka did another sliding D, but this time using an elbow instead of a clothesline, for the pin. Great match. \*\*\*\*

8. Togi Makabe pinned Minoru Suzuki in 16:23 of a match where you pretty much knew the winner would also be in line for a title shot. They worked this to look like a fight. They were pounding each other and then Suzuki went after the knee. Suzuki is different from every wrestler in the business. In some ways he's not a smooth worker and is crappy at trading cooperative spots. But when it comes to heel timing, he's the best in the business right now. Nothing flashy. Suzuki worked on the knee with submissions which makes sense with Makabe's finisher being the kneedrop. Makabe came back, missed the kneedrop and Suzuki worked on a heel hook and was cranking it. They teased a ref stoppage since Makabe wouldn't quit. Suzuki was cranking the hold and telling the ref to stop it, which was awesome as Makabe wouldn't quit. It made the rope break when Makabe got it so much more dramatic. Suzuki went for a choke but Makabe broke it and hit a clumsy lariat. Makabe hit a Death Valley driver for a near fall. Suzuki started kicking the hell out of Makabe's right knee but Makabe hit a lariat. Makabe later used a German superplex. Makabe went to the top rope for his kneedrop finisher. Suzuki climbed up and the two were punching and Suzuki was head-butting. Makabe knocked Suzuki off the top rope. Suzuki was actually getting up when Makabe came off and nailed the King Kong kneedrop (old school Bombs Away). Makabe went back up and hit a second King Kong kneedrop to the back of Suzuki's neck as he was face first on the ground, for the pin. \*\*\*3/4

9. Hiroshi Tanahashi won the IWGP heavyweight title from Kazuchika Okada in 28:06. This one is worth going out of your way to see. It has just about every aspect of a great match, and they did it with no weapons, no shortcuts, no blood, not overdoing and prostituting their finishes for easy near fall pops (not that there's anything wrong with that in a main event world title match). Okada was working a Kravat style submission on Tanahashi's neck. Okada did the A.J. Styles spot where he hit the perfectly timed dropkick as Tanahashi came off the rope, although Okada got six inches higher. Later in the match, Tanahashi hit a big plancha off the top rope to the floor. Okada used a DDT on Tanahashi's head and went back to the Kravat submission. Okada did the Randy Savage elbow off the top and went for his rainmaker (short lariat), which is his big move. Tanahashi escaped. Okada put Tanahashi on his shoulders like he's going to do a Death Valley Driver, but Tanahashi maneuvered out and went for the sling blade (necktie lariat) but Okada hit another dropkick. Okada used a kick to the face. Tanahashi was back with a sunset flip, followed by a dragon screw, a twisting leglock and finally a combination Texas cloverleaf and lion tamer, but Okada escaped. Tanahashi followed with a German suplex for a near fall and a falcon arrow for a near fall. He went to the top but missed the high fly flow. Okada used combination emerald frosien into a backbreaker for a near fall. Okada put Tanahashi on his shoulders for a Death Valley Driver but instead gave him a neckbreaker from that position for another near fall. Okada went for the tombstone piledriver, but Tanahashi got out and hit a dragon suplex for a near fall. Okada was on the ground on his stomach and Tanahashi came off the top with a high fly flow to the back. He went to the top for a second one, but Okada turned over and got his knees up. Okada twice went for the tombstone piledriver. The first time Tanahashi got out. The second time, Tanahashi reversed, nailed the tombstone. The two did a series of reversals until Tanahashi finally hit the sling blade and the high fly flow and got the pin. The crowd reaction was top tier among world title changes I've seen, not the

greatest by any means, but better than 95%. Post match saw both Makabe and Tanaka come out and issue challenges for the next title shot. \*\*\*\*3/4